In the centuries that preceded the Enlightenment, the predominant worldview among educated Europeans was Augustinian Christianity. This meant, first of all, that the primary issues were religious salvation and how Christian belief and worship should be organized. Secondly, it meant that intellectual activity took place primarily within the Church, which also ran most institutions of higher learning, where clergy teaching. Augustinian Christians believed human nature to be fundamentally corrupt; humans not only inclined naturally towards sin but also had no innate inability to please God without divine revelation (mediated by the teachings of the clergy.) The main thrusts of the Renaissance and Reformation had broken with Augustinian doctrine by celebrating, respectively, the abilities of human reason and the redemptive powers of human faith in Christ. However, the impact of this humanism had been felt primarily outside of established universities and seminaries.

This impact, prior to 1700, had been felt by those interested in the study of nature. Natural philosophers pursued a new method of inquiry, known as empiricism because it based knowledge on sensory experience of the natural world. They also developed extensive networks for communication of their research – through presentations to other natural philosophers, through publications in learned journals and books, and most frequently, through correspondence. These two related developments – the ability of human reason to produce reliable, valuable knowledge about nature from sense experience and the tendency to share this knowledge with others, across Europe – constituted the foundation of the Enlightenment, a movement defined by its celebration of human-created knowledge.

The crucial aspect of the Enlightenment, for its contemporaries, was not any fixed set of ideas but the new modes of communication for ideas. The Enlightenment took place in part through formal channels such as the publication and distribution of books or scientific correspondence networks that included an estimated 1200 would-be scientists in the early 1700s and would engage well over 5,000 individuals across the century. In addition, Enlightenment spread also through practices that encouraged cultural exchange and communication through social gatherings that became gradually institutionalized into permanent literary and scientific academies.
However, we must resist the temptation to equate this movement with the effervescence of intellectual activity, by correspondence and in print, during the eighteenth century. Daniel Roche estimates that as late as 1789, only about 2500 French men, roughly 1% of the university-educated population, belonged to an academy, and not all of these should be considered sympathetic to “philosophy.” While a majority of the over 5000 documented authors of printed scientific books (in French, English and German alone) are known to have participated in networks of scientific correspondence, many – especially in northern Europe, especially in the first two-thirds of the century, continued to think of themselves as religiously devout and precisely the sort of specialized experts, *savants*, which the Enlightenment opposed. For to understand the Enlightenment as its participants did, we must not reduce it to mere knowledge but to a form of social and intellectual interaction forged around knowledge. Those in the eighteenth century who lived the Enlightenment experienced it as a collective ethos of seeking, producing and communicating new knowledge, more than a fixed set of ideas.

**The Philosophes**

Those who did this work described themselves frequently as “*Philosophes,*” in the literal sense, lovers of knowledge. Yet the essential reference work of Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie* (on which more shortly) described the *Philosophe* as the anthesis of the “obscure and retired” sage, esconced in his study or his laboratory. The motif of “light” spreading against darkness (a metaphor taken from Christian missionaries) referred in eighteenth-century writings by and about the *Lumières* not only to reason displacing ignorance, but to the wide circulation of knowledge all across society. The ideal of knowledge as light spreading naturally was intended to displace an ideal of knowledge as limited to a privileged few and deriving from a single corpus of texts, restricted in the rarified library of a seminary or in a private study of the elite.

Moreover, a *Philosophe* could not be defined as merely one who made free use of reason and transgressed limits set by religious authorities. Instead, the *philosophe* must understand not what he opposes but must contemplate as well his own thought and actions.\(^1\) According to this article, which well expresses

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1 Gabriel François Venel, “Philosophe,” *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaires raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers... de*
the ideal of the *philosophe* and by extension the Enlightenment, most of humanity had been and continued to be motivated, for better or worse, by “their passions” – emotions, instincts, fears or desires which remained unknown and unknowable even to those who experienced them. The key act of the Philosophe, and the essential ideal of the Enlightenment, was the use of reason precisely to reflect upon, to understand and thereby to master those passions. The article highlights the key points of Enlightenment thought and of Philosophic reflection – unfettered use of reason to challenge received ideas and empirical sense experience to seek truth about nature – but makes clear that the key to the “philosophic mind” is the faculty of judgment, exercised first and foremost on oneself. In this way, we see, that the Philosophic agenda, in its essence, was for humankind to learn to free itself from received knowledge, from false belief, and from the exploitation of the ignorance of the many – by leading all men and women to cultivate their faculty of judgment as the basis of their own moral and ethical code.

By leading humans to escape their basic physical and emotional basic drives through reason, the Philosophes sought to lead humanity towards its nature, free from fear of or control by others and free from the desire to terrify or compel others. The Philosophes thus set a model for human interaction by cultivating together their “sociable qualities,” accepting that no human need be the enemy of another, and that all are inclined, by their rational nature, to be useful to and be pleased by others. This trait of engaging with the welfare and happiness of others rather than merely seeking to satisfy one’s own basic needs, the article on “Philosophe” concluded0, separated humans from animals. Precisely because this idea appeared, from history and observation of contemporary society, so remarkable, the *Philosophe* ideal had to be defined and defended. Those who would be *Philosophes* had a moral obligation not only to use reason but to see that others do so.

To participate in the Enlightenment did not require one to write books but merely to participate actively in intellectual life at royal courts and in capital cities. Men and women of the Enlightenment rarely pursued their intellectual interests in isolation; they thrived at universities (especially in northern Europe), in scientific and literary academies, and in discussion circles. An essay entitled “men of letters,” published in

*Diderot - d'Alembert* (1765).
the important reference work the *Encyclopédie* (on which more shortly), proposes that those who participate in the Enlightenment should be polymathic, sociable, autonomous, and practical. Polymathy refers to a breadth of mind rather than a specialization, one whose interests ranged “from mathematics to poetry, and who could assess equally well a book on metaphysics as a stage play.” Sociability refers to a desire to articulate and spread knowledge to others, whose mind is “better suited to polite society [*le monde*] than to the [seclusion of] the private study.” In this respect, eighteenth-century *gens de lettres* saw themselves as progressing from their predecessors of the Renaissance and Classical age, who had necessarily “removed themselves from society” and interacted only with each other and elite audiences. As a quintessential Enlightenment man of letters, Louis Sébastien Mercier, put it, the spirit of the Enlightenment was to write in the “living language of the people” rather than the “dead eloquence” of aristocrats. Autonomy refers to the intellectual and moral liberty of the Enlightenment, to be free of partisanship or obligation to advance any particular interest. For the *Encyclopédie, gens de lettres* therefore must display “greater independence of mind than ordinary men” and avoid servile dedications designed to appeal to the “vanity of a patron.” Finally, Enlightenment men and women of letters had to view knowledge as practical and usable. Not only would they disprove such irrational “superstitious beliefs” as “the predictions of astrologers” and the “guesswork of magicians,” but would “render contemptible … the false prestige and imagined marvels of meaningless, scholarly debates.” Instead, the true *gens de lettres* sought always to “instruct” and “cultivate” their audience.

This conception of Enlightenment emphasized the role of writers in advancing the progress of reason, which would not reach fruition until a future age. As Immanuel Kant wrote memorably, “We do not live in an Enlightened age, but in an age of Enlightenment.” The Marquis Antoine de Condorcet, a leading voice of French Enlightenment rationalism, wrote of his own age as the ninth of ten époques in the history of human reason. Condorcet illustrated how the men and women of the Enlightenment thought of themselves as a distinct minority acting against the mainstream culture of their own age, united by their shared desire to spread knowledge for the future improvement of humanity. In his anti-slavery pamphlet of 1789, the Marquis

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2 Voltaire, “*Gens de lettres,*” *Encyclopédie,* vol VIII, 1757.
de Condorcet, noted that *philosophes* were “less interested in discovering new truth than in propagating it” but also insisted that *philosophes* were those who spoke out to defend the least well off and defenseless. Condorcet, in one of the earliest and most trenchant anti-slavery tracts published in France, asked, “Who...dares to complain about the barbarism of criminal laws, about the cruelty with which [religious minorities] have been deprived of their rights ..., about the harshness and injustice of the laws against [the poor]? Who had the boldness to pretend that [slavery] would be useful to the people and in accord with justice to insure liberty of commerce and industry?” Only, he answered, “the *philosophes*...”

**Enlightenment Thought: Reason, Nature, and Religion**

Any discussion of the individuals, ideas and practices that made up the Enlightenment must begin with the twin issues of religion and science, or more precisely with the point at which they intersect -- nature. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had brought significant breakthroughs in observation and interpretation of nature, from which emerged two lines of thought that would lay the foundation for the Enlightenment. René Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* (1637) emphasized the power of human reason to analyze all propositions without reliance on preconception or reliance on external authority, be it the Bible, the treatises of Aristotle or the medieval attempts at synthesizing Aristotle and the Bible, which had become the basis for the university curriculum. Descartes argued that instead of reliance on authorities to demonstrate an idea, reason alone should provide the proof, using logical inferences which would be much more likely to produce certainty. This method of producing knowledge became the basis of the school of thought known as rationalism, though his contemporaries called it simply the “New Philosophy.” New Philosophy attracted many who wanted to challenge the dominant university curriculum and received thought about nature. Many however, especially in England, found Descartes too abstract and turned to Francis Bacon. Bacon’s *Novum Organon* (1620) or “New System” emphasized the need for sense experience and testing through experimentation, to produce reliable knowledge about nature. Bacon’s focus on the need for empirical knowledge to know nature initiated a school of thought that became dominant in England and would include

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the two writers who had the greatest impact on the Enlightenment, John Locke and Isaac Newton. Other seventeenth-century alternatives to the dominant ways of thinking influenced the Enlightenment, by inspiring leading thinkers to read Holy Scriptures and other important texts critically. Among the most novel readers of the Bible, whose critical spirit and readable style greatly influenced the Enlightenment, was Pierre Bayle, a Calvinist whose family had fled France after persecution by King Louis XIV. In his widely read *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697) Bayle picked up on Descartes’ insight that no idea should be too sacred to escape critical examination. Rather than proposing an affirmative philosophy to replace established thought, Bayle questioned a variety of Christian beliefs about Scripture, religious belief, morality and history. Many of these traditional notions, he argued, were in fact not well supported by the Bible. The Bible itself, he suggested, had been written as a set of myths intended to terrify and appeal to the emotions of those who could not or would not think for themselves. Bayle noted the frequent occurrences in history of religious persecution and moral hypocrisy by prominent figures of the Bible.

Some Catholic theologians believed that any form of “New Philosophy,” from Cartesian rationalism to Bayle’s skepticism led to unbelief. These orthodox writers denounced all rational-critical approaches as materialism (the belief that there is no soul or spirit, distinct from matter, in the universe) and atheism (the belief that there is no god, which some argued necessarily resulted from materialism.). In fact, Bayle remained a devout Christian, committed to the central Calvinist idea that only God’s grace and personal devotion to it could lead to salvation. He did not believe that texts, reason, or even empirical experience could lead humans to know God or to learn morality. Morality on earth was for Bayle a matter distinct from faith, since morality did not cause faith nor did a lack of faith prevent humans from behaving morally. Bayle’s skepticism would have a great impact on the Enlightenment.

*Deism and Empiricism*

The mainstream of Enlightenment that emerged in the eighteenth century, however, was not a movement against religion or Christianity. It targeted tradition and unproven ideas. As the French writer and editor Denis Diderot wrote, the Enlightenment sought to enact “a revolution in men’s minds to free them from prejudice.” By “prejudice,” Diderot meant specifically dogma, or the beliefs that Catholics were
required to accept on the authority of the clergy as interpreters of divine revelation. Another term, “fanaticism” described the excesses and abuses that Enlightenment writers perceived among Protestants, some of whom claimed direct revelation from God but who could support their claims only by referring to internal feelings of “conscience,” not to anything that could be observed in the natural world. The primary goal of Enlightenment writings about religion was to diminish the use of “prejudice” (also referred to as “superstition”) and “fanaticism” to support any exercise of authority of religious and political authority not consistent with reason. For instance, Enlightenment writers highlighted the barbarism of witchcraft trials, which often began with unsupported denunciations of young women, followed by confessions induced through torture, and ending with grisly burning alive of suspected witches – all under the supervision of clerical authority. By the early eighteenth century, rationalist criticisms of this practice led to its suppression in western Europe. Enlightenment writers also targeted the religious courts in Spain and Italy, known as the Inquisition. These courts had the authority to censor books, arrest and torture those accused of heresy to induce confessions, and to inflict heavy physical as well as political punishments on those found guilty – often in the absence of any material evidence or logical basis to the conviction.

The devout defended Christianity, and specifically the Bible, as the only basis for belief that could provide the moral certainty that they considered essential to society. Knowledge derived from reason, they argued, lacked the consistency provided by religious doctrine, and without consistent guidelines, people by human nature would cede to the temptation towards selfishness and irresponsibility. Thus for the devout, traditional Christianity alone could assure salvation of the soul by providing guidance in the face of what they considered the inescapable truth that human nature inclined to sin. For Catholics in particular, the clergy played a crucial role in helping people gain absolution for their sins, by administering the Holy Sacraments, and by suppressing heretical beliefs. To rely on human reason alone as a basis for religious belief, they thought, represented arrogance against God, which would lead only to even more wicked behavior, and thus even greater divine punishment. Leading anti-Enlightenment writers, such as Guillaume Berthier long-time editor of the *Journal de Trévoux*, made these arguments personal, attacking *Philosophes* as active deists and atheists seeking attack the moral authority of Christianity, so that they could indulge their own temptations.
and passions. Even those sympathetic to natural theology and reasonable Christianity, especially among the Anglican clergy, drew the line at what they considered excessive calls for toleration.

A significant number of educated Christians sought to reconcile the various strands of “New Philosophy,” including rationalism, empiricism and skepticism, with Christian beliefs and practices. This tendency to render theology rational and natural emerged most strongly among the clergy of the Church of England, which had as early as the sixteenth century reduced the basic tenets of belief to enable adherents to disagree on many doctrinal matters. This tendency to seek “common ground,” known as Latitudinarianism, emphasized neither interpretations of Scripture nor debates over liturgy but instead focused on the central tenets of religious belief. These central tenets, as laid out for instance by Charles Blount, in his *The Oracles of Reason* (1693), were those that all believers could assent to, without needing the teaching of the clergy—namely, God’s omnipotence as creator of the entire natural world. God’s omnipresence in the natural world was the essence of what Blunt called “the deist’s religion.”

Deism drew on three important strains in Renaissance thought. Renaissance Platonism held that God was by definition perfect and omnipotent so that nothing in Creation could be an error and need correction; Renaissance humanism praised humankind as God’s greatest creation; and Renaissance philology critically analyzed the Scriptures and showed them to have changed over time through translation and editing. These tendencies were synthesized into a “natural theology,” or as it become widely known, *deism* based on the premise that nature, including human nature, reflected the true form of perfect divine revelation, rather than the evidently flawed Bible. Human beings, in their natural form, possessed a God-given ability to determine for themselves how to act morally and consistent with God’s will, by use of reason. Deist doctrine thus opposed the medieval Christian principle than humans were born with an instinct or appetite for sin and that only strict adherence to church teachings could ensure their salvation.

John Locke’s pamphlet, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), advanced this argument that reason applied to nature could lead to an understanding of God. Locke concluded that God was not vengeful, angry or punitive but a sympathetic “God of patience and consolation … rich in mercy,” in whom humans could believe because it was reasonable to do so—not out of fear or coercion. Building on Locke, the Irish-
born John Toland wrote *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), in which he criticized as unworthy of human belief any idea inconsistent with reason, including divine miracles mentioned in the Bible. Although Toland sought to avoid trouble by not specifying which miracles he considered unworthy of belief, both the Catholic and Anglican clergy condemned his book, forcing him into hiding. Even so, Toland’s writing influenced subsequent deists to question the divinity of Jesus Christ as lacking any empirical evidence or rational logic. Deists sought to refine religious belief to its basic elements and to eliminate all belief that could not be supported by reason and empirical evidence of the natural world. To this end, Deists sought to understand human thought as entirely arising from the material body as it encountered the physical universe. That which could not be understood by rational minds and that which could not be supported by physical evidence could not, no matter how long its pedigree, be considered true. Deism, thus, stood between traditional Christianity and materialist atheism.

Although orthodox Christians continued to denounce the “new method” of experimental science as imposing limits on God’s power, many educated Christians came to share the deists’ view that the study of nature, especially the physical sciences, brought mankind closer to God without displacing God. Isaac Newton became a hero in the philosophy of nature because he drew upon extensive observations and calculations to produce laws of gravity that appeared to describe accurately the motion of physical matter without reference to God. At the same time, Newton set forth the essence of the natural Christian’s creed when he refused to speculate about the origins of these forces in the material world. Lacking any direct sense experience, Newton wrote, he would “feign no hypothesis,” clearly implying that without physical evidence, science had no basis to doubt divine creation. Another example of a major scientific treatise which ignored the Bible as a commentary on the physical world, Georges Buffon’s *Natural History of the Earth* (36 volumes, 1749 – 1788) became a best-seller and made its author the leading naturalist of the mid-century. Buffon proposed that everything in the world, from “the most formless matter” to “the most perfect creature,” had evolved from the same origin over thousands of years. Indicative of its appeal even to devout readers, the leading Jesuit magazine concluded that Buffon’s account, based on evidence such as fossils, did not contradict the Bible – if one read the seven days of creation metaphorically rather than literally.
Enlightenment empiricism and orthodox Christianity disagreed on the role of the clergy in determining what if any limits should exist on scientific inquiry. In the years just prior to his treatise on Christianity, John Locke published his epochal *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which sought to explain the origins of human thought, including religious belief, in the interaction of the body and mind with the physical world. Where, critics and supporters alike wondered, did this leave the soul, the spirit and the belief in a God who could not be directly experienced? The variety of answers proposed – from the fibrous tissue of the spinal column connecting the brain to the nervous system to the hollow spaces of the brain itself – proved the essential point of Lockean empiricism – that different rational minds, having different sense experiences, would produce different ideas. On topics of which there could be no direct sense experience, such as morality or theology, there could be no basis for a rationally agreed upon truth. The only recourse for rational beings, then, would be to tolerate difference of opinion. While the degree of toleration that even Locke and his strongest supporters advocated was very limited, a basic principle of the Enlightenment had been set forth – that there was no rational basis for limiting the free inquiry of the human mind about the natural world. Defending this principle that no moral or political authority could claim a religious or moral basis for its power became the central cause of the Enlightenment and especially of the French *Philosophes*. 

**The Encyclopédie and Enlightenment Thought**

Just as the *Philosophes* embodied through their interactions the Enlightenment idea of human beings as inherently social, then the *Encyclopédie* in its conception and execution, most clearly represented Enlightenment ideals about the utility of knowledge. Readily accessible to all readers, illustrated with engraved diagrams, and clearly organized with articles arranged alphabetically, cross referenced to related topics, a book designed to contain the complete “cycle of knowledge” had been first edited and published by the English printer Robert Chambers in 1728. Chambers had perhaps borrowed the idea from reports that the Ming Emporer of China, in the early fifteenth century, had sponsored a massive compendium of all knowledge, known as the *Yongle Dadian*. Chambers’ motives in publishing a reference work that had no
identified author were primarily commercial, and the success of his work inspired others including the Scottish editors of the first, three-volume edition of the *Encyclopedia Brittanica* (1768).

Denis Diderot, a talented young French writer who, despite modest origins as the son of a skilled artisan, sought to enter into Parisian literary life to contribute to the Enlightenment. Diderot followed closely intellectual and artistic developments in England, and in the 1740s, he proposed to a French publisher to translate Chambers’ reference work. With the aid of a far more prominent and well-connected nobleman, mathematician and writer, Jean LeRond d’Alembert, the project quickly grew into a much broader and more significant project: an inventory of all current fields of knowledge including the most advanced new ideas of the Enlightenment, that would illustrate the full range of Philosophes’ interests. As the editors stated in the preface to the first volume (1751), the work intended “to change the general way of thinking. …All things must be examined without sparing anyone’s sensibilities … we must return liberty to the arts and sciences” by freeing specialized knowledge from both educated elites and from the secret traditions of artisanal corporations. This purpose is clearly illustrated by the frontispiece, an illustration of the “Tree of knowledge,” that would display all “human knowledge in the glance of an eye.” [illustration of tree of knowledge?]

Diderot and D’Alembert recruited over 140 authors to write over 72,000 articles on specialized topics but which would be readily understood by general readers. The editors recruited authors based on their expertise in the subject matter, ensuring the information would be reliable. Moreover, they identified a key portion of their readership ahead of time as well. Unlike almost every other multi-volume work published in the era, it had no single patron who sponsored the work in exchange for a dedication; instead, the financial backing came from almost four thousand subscribers who paid in advance for their copies, enabling the editors to expand their project. Between 1751 and 1772, 21 volumes of text and eleven volumes of engraved illustrations were published, and the series became both a commercial and intellectual success.

A significant number of articles discussed technology, and a majority of the engraved diagrams illustrated machinery and manufacturing processes. Consistent with the Enlightenment’s support for the useful application of knowledge, these articles and engravings sought to connect the skills of artisans to the
science of scholars by emphasizing improvements of efficiency and ingenuity in production. The *Encyclopédie* also devoted significant concern to the useful application of knowledge from the new fields that would come to be known in later centuries as moral philosophy and social sciences, such as political economy. These articles demonstrate the influence of Scottish philosophers on the Enlightenment, notably David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) which proposed that the empirical method of observation and reflection on “the common course of human life” could produce useful truths about human morality. Hume and the “moral sense” school of philosophy sought to discover the natural origins of human morality. Did it occur as an innate instinct or, as most Scottish Enlightenment authors including Hume, Adam Ferguson (whose work influenced Thomas Jefferson) and Adam Smith thought, were moral sentiments learned through the natural interactions of men in society? If so, human communal interaction itself would temper the individual’s instinctual appetites and provide the basis for proper morality, as well as laws. Such an approach necessarily called into question the need for human behavior to be checked by religious dogma or clerical authority. Hume, in his *Natural History of Religion* (1755) expressed support for beliefs that could be understood to have emerged from natural human interaction and could be supported by reason, such as Christian moral teachings. But he questioned those beliefs and practices that had been imposed in the past and did not enhance moral behavior in the present, such as Lent.

*The Encyclopédie: Publication and Resistance*

The publication of the first volume in 1751 signaled the beginning of a period in which the pace of Enlightenment publication in France intensified, as did open resistance by defenders of religious and social orthodoxy. These defenders criticized specific articles in the early volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, and an all-out polemic erupted in 1757 in response to the seventh volume, specifically in response to d’Alembert’s article on the Swiss capital of “Geneva.” Geneva had been the home of John Calvin and the birthplace of the Reformed Church, which had in the sixteenth century exerted a great influence in France, until being suppressed by Louis XIV in 1685. D’Alembert used the article to praise the Calvinist clergy of Geneva who, he said “reject everything called a mystery and …propose nothing as a belief that runs counter to reason” and
who, he claimed, deny “the necessity of revelation [and] dogma,” and instead preach beliefs based on their “utility” for society. He thereby enraged orthodox Catholics, including the leading bishops of France, whose wrath came down on the entire Encyclopédie.

In response to this article, the editors and authors of the entire Encyclopédie were charged in court with seeking “to propagate materialism, destroy religion, inspire independence of mind, and contribute to the corruption of morals.” In 1759, the Parlement of Paris, the highest court in France, condemned the book and ordered it suppressed; the editors were denied legal authorization to publish future volumes. Moreover, a new standard for royal censorship was established, that would render unfit for publication “any work that tends towards” a criticism of “government, religion or morality,” and which required the imprisonment of any author, printer or bookseller who contributed to the circulation of such a work. Fortunately for the editors, the Director of the Parisian Book Trade guild, who held responsibility for enforcing censorship, had become committed to the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment. He allowed the editors to continue their project clandestinely, publishing without formal approval but with a “tacit permission.” Both the near confiscation of the entire work (and the potential for a round-up of its editors, authors, printers and sellers) and its eventual commercial and intellectual success illustrate the intellectual and political tensions that the Enlightenment brought out in later eighteenth-century France.

In the 1760s, Diderot brought the project back on track and pushed it to completion in 1772. Due to the reliability and relevance of its articles and to the publicity surrounding its near suppression, the original print run of 4000 copies sold out easily, despite the high price of 1500 livres for the entire set. In response to the widespread demand, the Typographical Society of Neufchatel in Switzerland produced numerous editions in smaller formats, priced more affordably between 200 and 400 livres per set, selling over 16,000 copies – and generating more than a million livres of profit. In this respect, the Encyclopédie also illustrated a phenomenon of publishing at the height of the Enlightenment, in the later 1770s – the development of a widespread market demand of readers able and willing to spend hundreds of livres for multi-volume sets, including the complete works of prominent authors, multi-volume works of history or natural philosophy, or reference works such as the Éncyclopédie. Such works required a great deal of financial investment to
publish and could generate great return for authors and/or printers – but only if they could count on the
government not only not to censor or suppress the work but to defend it from copyright infringement in the
form of less expensive counterfeit editions from abroad. The capitalistic book market – provided that the
intellectual freedom and intellectual property of authors and publishers could be defended – proved a
powerful force for the spread of liberal ideas.  

The Enlightenment and the Wider World

The “cycle” of knowledge encompassed by the Enlightenment also looked beyond Europe to the
wider world, with which Europe was increasingly interacting in the eighteenth century. Genres of writing
about the wider world proliferated – atlases and gazetteers; imagined and real travelogues; biological and
anthropological histories of overseas lands and peoples; treatises on the economics of trade featuring frank
descriptions of slavery and the slave trade all fascinated and provoked Enlightenment-era readers and
commentators. Among the most widely discussed of such works was Guillaume Raynal’s history of
European overseas expansion, *Philosophical and Political History of the European Colonies and Commerce
in the Two Indies* (1770). Originally published in six volumes, the work appeared in at least seventy versions
(including counterfeits) before 1789. Like the *Encyclopédie*, this was a collaborative work, whose writings
were woven together by Raynal, who emphasized detail and thoroughness over readability. Still, amidst the
dense discussions of geography, economics, society and indigenous cultures of European colonies, the
*Histoire* offered eloquent and trenchant critiques of Spanish, English and French colonial policies, especially
concerning slavery and the slave trade. Readers were fascinated by the exotic nature of other lands and
peoples, outraged at Europeans’ exploitation of those lands and peoples (including enslaved Africans), and
responsive to theoretical discussions of government, commerce and morality in the colonial world. Though
the work did not propose specific reforms to organized religion, despotic government, mercantilist
commercial policies or the slave trade, it did provoke the Catholic Church to place it on the Index of
forbidden works and would prove to have a lasting influence on anti-colonial arguments.

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If Raynal’s *Deux Indes* constituted the final blooming of the Enlightenment spirit, one of its first flowerings came in another exoticist work – the less detailed, but much more readable, *Persian Letters* by the Baron de Montesqueiu (1721). This book became one of the first great, scandalous successes of eighteenth-century publishing. From its original, anonymous edition (published in Holland, where censorship was much looser than France), it reached ten editions. Capitalizing on the success of other travel accounts about the Near East -- such as Lady Wortley Montague’s *Letters* (1717) about her travels to the court of the Ottoman empire – Montesquieu’s story appeared on the surface to highlight for French readers the apparent strangeness of eastern mores. Though But so doing, Montesquieu implicitly highlighted the strangeness of European and French customs in the eyes of an outsider. In a series of fictionalized correspondence between two traveling Persian courtiers and their home, the book satirizes contemporary French social and political practices, ideas and individuals. Moreover, it contained numerous set-piece parables about morality and capsule summaries of political philosophy. The travelers Usbek and Rica are asked “how can one be Persian?” and compare in their letters home their religious beliefs, marital and family customs, and governmental system with what they encounter in the fictional Europe of the novel. On another level, Montesquieu challenged his European readers to ask how their own customs developed, to examine their own most cherished beliefs about themselves and their home countries, and to realize that no single way that human beings live is necessarily an immutable, “natural” order of things. At the same time, the letters from the harem back home to the travelers tell a story of increasing disorder, unrest and infidelity in the seraglio, providing a parable of the unsteadiness of despotic governments and seeming to reaffirm a universal ideal of human dignity and desire for personal freedom.

**The Enemy of Infamy: Voltaire**

If books such as the *Encyclopédie* and *Histoire des Deux Indes* well express the major themes and tensions of the age, then the lives and works of key *Philosophes* give a sense of how the leading minds of the century contributed to the Enlightenment. The unrivaled leader of the Philosophic movement and the embodiment of the mainstream or “High Enlightenment,” in its early and middle phases, was born François-
Marie Arouet but became known as Voltaire (1694- 1778). His father, a Parisian notary who hoped his son would become a lawyer, enrolled the young boy in the Collège Louis-le-Grand, a prestigious secondary school. At the age of seventeen, the mother of a school friend invited him to her home, where she held a regular gathering of prominent Parisian nobles, magistrates and financiers. The elites of this milieu, he realized, could help him attain prestige, status, and fortune -- if he made a favorable impression. Since he lacked family wealth or title, the young Arouet drew on the only resource he had, his knowledge of classical literature. He wrote poetry and short commentaries on leading literary quarrels of the day, which he would read to his new-found friends. Among these friends, a marquis and his wife arranged for the young man to read his work to the royal theater troupe, for whom he wrote a *Oedipe*, a five-act verse tragedy. Indicative of his talent, few noticed at the time that the work included couplets mocking the clergy. The troupe staged the play to acclaim, which entitled the author to have it printed. Arouet dedicated the edition to the Regent governing France, the Duke of Orléans, and signed it with a pen name, “Voltaire.” He had made a very traditional entry into literary life, by writing in the traditional genre of tragedy, for the well established venue of the royal theater, and helped by elite patrons. From this conventional beginning, he would go on to be the most widely recognized advocate of the Enlightenment.

Voltaire’s early success with tragedies and poems helped him achieve the key to success for writers of the day – financial support and an honorific position at the royal court. But such patronage did not dampen his critical wit; instead, it made him a more influential critic of the status quo. Indeed, he quickly bumped up against the limits of the still powerful Old Regime social hierarchy. In 1726, he made a caustic remark at the expense of the Chevalier de Rohan, who had his lackeys exercise the nobleman’s prerogative of violence and beat up the young writer. After a brief imprisonment, Voltaire fled to London for two years, which had a profound effect on his mind, his writing style and his agenda as a writer. In London, Voltaire learned the English language, read English literature and discovered English thought and culture. He learned of Anglicanism, with its wider toleration of doctrines, including natural theology and deism. He discovered the writings of a leading Anglican, John Locke, who described the functioning of the mind as a material, physical organ responding to sense experience rather than a wholly separate realm from matter. He
discovered the policies that Locke and the Whig party had brought to England since the Glorious Revolution of 1689, beginning with some degree of religious toleration. (Toleration had been extended only towards certain forms of Christianity, and Anglicanism remained the Established, or state-subsidized, religion to which all office-holders had to swear an oath). He discovered a freer and more active press which conveyed new ideas to a wider reading public than in France. He discovered a culture imbued with the influence of Newton and other leading scientists, whose theories of matter, physics and nature did not appear subject to religious or political censorship. He discovered a society that seemed less hierarchical and more dynamic; he was particularly impressed with commercial wealth accruing in London. He discovered a political system that had cultural and legal limits on the power of the crown, in which cities and rural estate owners were represented in Parliament. In short, he discovered features of English politics and culture that he would highlight in a book, *Philosophical Letters* (first published in English in 1734), that laid out a theoretical, rather than practical, model of an Enlightened society for the European continent.

Significantly, Voltaire’s use of England as a template of modernity and Enlightenment deliberately exaggerated the actual freedom, toleration and prosperity enjoyed by the English people. He sought to make clear and convincing points to general readers about what he now saw as flaws in places other than England. For instance, his praise of religious toleration in England far overstated the actual situation, but became well-known because of his memorable formulation: “If there were only one religion in England, there would be fear of despotism; if there were but two, the people would cut one another’s throats; but there are thirty and they all live happy and in peace.” Likewise, in his praise for the uniquely English commercial spirit – “In England, the younger son of a peer of the realm does not disdain trade [while] in France, the merchant hears his profession spoken of scornfully” -- he overstated the extent to which French elites disdained commerce and downplayed the importance of England’s monopolistic trade arrangements with overseas colonies, including the slave trade.

By 1745, he had risen to the important post of Royal Historiographer, followed a year later by his election to the prestigious French Academy. In 1749 he accepted the invitation of King Frederick II of Prussia to his new, French-styled court of Sans Souci at Potsdam. In 1755, with personal wealth acquired
from the London stock-market, he moved to the first of his two private estates in Switzerland. Until the end of his life in 1778, Voltaire remained out of the maelstrom of Parisian literary life, safely protected from religious and political authorities, as well as literary rivalries. From this lofty perch, he engaged in the most voluminous correspondence of the eighteenth century. Through tens of thousands of letters, he remained abreast of important scientific and literary developments, defended those whom he thought had been wronged by religious or political oppression, encouraged younger writers, and when possible, used his renown and connections to influence governments. His letters often became public documents – copied, circulated, read aloud at social gatherings, and eventually printed in his collected works, the first edition of which appeared shortly after his death in 1778. Voltaire signed every letter to his intellectual allies with an encouragement to “crush infamy” – a slogan, meaning to fight religious and political oppression, which summarized his approach to intellectual life.

Voltaire hoped to convince the literate and civically active elements across Europe to promote gradual reform of culture, economy, society and government on the model of England. The first target of this effort, he made clear, must be the clergy and traditional teachings of the Christian church, both the “superstition” (meaning prejudice and closed-mindedness) of Catholicism and the “enthusiasm” (meaning fanaticism) of Protestantism, which he contrasted with the openness and utility of natural theology. His weapon in this attack was satire, which he used to highlight contradictions and hypocrisies of Christian liturgy and practices, and depicted as antiquated and unworthy of rational men. In his own belief, Voltaire remained a deist, opposed to atheism as both lacking any empirical evidence and unable to sustain moral behavior. He did not expect everyone to become a deist, but he did insist on the need for toleration of many different religious beliefs. In much of his later writing, he highlighted how intolerance led to abuses of power, as in the notorious Calas case of 1760. The magistrates of Toulouse condemned to execution a Calvinist, Jean Calas, on the basis of no hard evidence, because they suspected Calas had murdered his son to prevent his conversion to Catholicism. Thanks to Voltaire’s letters and pamphlets, the Calas family regained its property and Calas was post-humously exculpated. The incident taught Voltaire and other Philosophes the value of using their literary and intellectual skill to appeal directly to public opinion.
In the months before his death in 1778, Voltaire returned triumphally to Paris, where he was celebrated as a member of the royal French Academy, had his plays performed by the royal theater, received favorable treatment in the government press and was honored by aristocratic elites who subscribed to a luxury edition of his complete works. A man who had started the Enlightenment and promoted it throughout his life still managed to reach the highest ranks of literary glory and patronage. Voltaire had become known across Europe as a living example of the symbiosis – rather than opposition – of absolutist government and aristocracy on the one hand, and the moderate, reform-minded “High Enlightenment,” on the other.

**Rousseau: Morality, Nature and Sentiment**

It was precisely the close association of Voltaire and other leading *Philosophes* with social and political elites that led another writer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778), to withdraw from Parisian literary life. Rousseau did not oppose Enlightenment but sought to develop an alternative strain of thought about human nature and morality. Rousseau’s differences with the *Philosophes* were both ideological and psychological. Self-taught and raised by a Calvinist artisan in Geneva, he came to understand human nature as inherently, even instinctively, virtuous but easily corrupted by society. As the author late in his life of one of the first introspective autobiographies, *Confessions*, Rousseau demonstrated how such early life experiences as losing his mother and being fired from the employ of a prominent aristocrat led him to distrust affectation and insincerity, which he perceived as rampant among leading Enlightenment figures. To Rousseau, the greatest threat to human nature came from what others thought of as its greatest achievement, unwritten rules of politeness and civility.

Rousseau first gained notoriety in 1749, when he won an essay contest sponsored by the literary Academy of Dijon, which asked whether the “arts and sciences” had contributed to the improvement of human morality. Most of the other respondents, influenced by the Enlightenment’s emphasis on the practical utility of knowledge, supported the proposition. Rousseau, however, won the contest.  

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5 His entry later became known as the *First Discourse* (1750), when combined with a second discourse *On the Origins of Inequality* (1754).
his reputation as a critic of the Enlightenment’s emphasis on the practical application of reason and on sociability as the basis of morality. Instead, Rousseau proposed a view of human nature as inherently solitary. For Rousseau, the state of nature in which humans existed in isolation, without language, family or property, was not a state of anarchy and constant conflict. In isolation, humans enjoyed true freedom because they determined their own behavior and were not governed by imposed rules. By their nature, he believed, all animals including humans instinctively felt sympathy and pity towards their own kind. However, as humans had formed societies and developed language, private property, and social conventions, including man-made rules of conduct and forms of civil government, humans had developed the basis for competition, pervasive insecurity, and material, moral and political inequality. Rousseau then devoted his life, thought and writings to finding ways to recover and retain the virtues of human nature, including freedom.

Rousseau addressed the theme of freedom, specifically the political freedom of the individual in society, in a book that expressed his boldest and most original ideas, the *Social Contract* (1762). Little-read in his time, the work has exerted great influence on the history of political theory, in part due a presumption widely held in the early nineteenth century (but based on little evidence) that the book had contributed directly to the French Revolution. Building on the argument of the first and second discourses that society had corrupted the virtuous nature of human beings, he considered in *Social Contract* how a society, and government, could be formed that would not corrupt virtue – and by implication, how the morality and virtue of those living in could be regenerated. Drawing on the tradition of thought known as civic humanism, and more specifically the theory of classical republicanism, Rousseau based his conception of an uncorrupted society on the republics of the classical world, notably Sparta, Rome and an idealized version of his native Geneva. Rousseau suggested that such city-states had been able to retain their morality and virtue, because they were close-knit communities in which the citizens generally shared a common cultural (and religious) background, occupied similar economic situations and moreover held common economic interests. The result of this homogeneity would be a common cultural and moral disposition, a shared set of customs and moral attitudes, or “mores.”

For Rousseau and other classical republicans, the proper basis for a social contract should be men of
similar mores seeking to preserve their shared cultural and moral disposition, rather than individuals pursuing self-interest (such as the defense of private property). Indeed, Rousseau argued, those who believed that their property constituted the essence of their liberty and that they enjoyed freedom so long as the government preserved their private property, had unwittingly subjected themselves to a loss of liberty. No man could be free under a government in which he could not feel himself to participate actively. Thus, his epochal opening sentence, “Men are born free,” meaning born into a state of nature in which they would naturally behave virtuously towards others, “but everywhere they are in chains,” because so few people actively participated in “sovereignty,” or self-governing republics. Those who entrusted government to elected representatives, Rousseau argued, were effectively slaves, because they were forced to obey a “sovereignty” to which they as individuals did not belong. Sovereignty must belong to all the citizens, and be “inalienable,” meaning it could not be represented by someone else, and “indivisible” meaning the functions of government could not be divided into different bodies – such as a permanent police force, army, judiciary or civil service. All these functions must be performed by citizens acting out of patriotic duty.

Thus, Rousseau sought a form of society and government in which all would be engaged in all aspects of government. To achieve such a republic required virtuous citizens, who by nature, would fulfill civic obligations and be willing to sacrifice their personal economic interests to serve the community. Moreover, because the lack of a designated military leader or a standing army would make the republic appear vulnerable, citizens had to be ready at any moment to defend their republic. But an even greater threat came from the temptation to pursue one’s own well-being rather than to defend the liberty of fellow citizens. For instance, citizens might use the opportunity of serving in the judiciary or the civil service to enrich themselves rather than serve the community. To preserve the republic from such temptations, citizens must feel strongly their moral obligation to other citizens. Rousseau, like earlier classical republican authors, called this sense of self-sacrifice “virtue;” many subsequent eighteenth century authors called it patriotism, meaning sacrifice for the people of the homeland, the patrie.

Rousseau’s idea of patriotic virtue was not obedience to the government, but the opposite. To preserve their sense of duty, citizens had to feel that their community and their laws were of their own
making and had not been imposed by others. This could only be possible if all individuals could forge a consensus, so that each individual’s desire and the collective desires become the same. This would not be, Rousseau famously wrote, a mere consensus or a mathematical majority, nor even the “will of all” individuals together; it had to be a collective belief, a “general will.” People who shared the same cultural mores, who interacted closely with each other in their personal and work lives, who were motivated by virtue or patriotism towards each other, would through the natural course of events form a “general will.” The purpose of the republic -- that is of the political institutions -- must be to preserve the conditions by which this general will can be translated into law. Those conditions included preserving the moral bonds of the people by preventing too much economic inequality, by reproducing the shared mores through civic festivals and education. To ensure that individuals not lose their sense of belonging to a moral community, there must be no “intermediate bodies,” no social groups such to which individuals might belong that would generate divided allegiances, and above all, no political factions. Those who did not agree with the general will had had their sense of virtue corrupted and were deceived about their true desires; in such cases, rather than force these individuals to live under a law not of their own making, they must either be excluded from the republic or brought back into the moral community, and be “forced to be free.”

Writing in a speculative and philosophical mode, Rousseau described how a people who were not free could found such a republic. He drew on classical history, in which republics were founded by powerful heroes, such as the Roman general Cincinnatus, and virtuous, all-knowing law-givers such as the Athenian king Solon, who fulfilled their civic obligations and then withdrew from any role in government. Once in place, a rotating executive would propose necessary laws, to be discussed and voted on by the people. In his description of a republic, Rousseau took great liberties, ignoring that the European cities which functioned in the eighteenth century as political republics (such as Venice, Genoa and Geneva) did have significant inequalities of wealth and power, dominated by a few oligarchic families. But Rousseau, drawing upon theoretical writings more than actual historical accounts, embraced the central argument of republican political theory (as discussed in chapter 1): that individuals sharing the same values can be sufficiently committed to each other as to form a society that preserves the essence of human nature, a synthesis of
personal liberty and affect for others.

Women, Gender and Morality

Rousseau’s concern with natural morality and a virtuous citizenry led him to consider the role of those whom he, and contemporary republican theorists, did not consider to have a nature appropriate for political citizenship – namely, women. Readers from the eighteenth century to the present have noted Rousseau’s evident obsession with women’s sexual attributes and social roles (especially child-bearing and breast-feeding), especially in his very popular works, the epistolary novel *Julie, or the Nouvelle Heloïse* (1761) and *Émile* (1762) on education and childhood development. In these works, Rousseau implied that women’s physiological differences from men determined their fate, both biologically and socially. A woman, he believed, was conditioned by her sexuality not only to be “constantly reminded of her sex” by her body functions of procreation, menstruation and menopause but also by her mind, which he though was essentially “feminine” and emotional rather than rational -- oriented not towards material interest but towards empathy, support and caretaking. As he wrote in his widely read novel about the education of young children, *Émile*, “girls feel themselves made to obey; they …should have little freedom.” By contrast, boys he argued had an inherent “natural state of justice” that compelled them to “rebel against injustice, which nature never intended them to tolerate.” 6

In this sense, Rousseau considered women to embody an idealized notion of human nature that ought to be, but too often is not, the true basis for human relations and social institutions. This nature, he considered” the “source of moral regeneration” in human society, but women could only inculcate it in her children, not to the rest of society. Only men could and would put forth this natural morality (which they would have learned, as boys, from their mothers) in economic, social and political relations. Therefore, to preserve this true human nature, of which women were the repositories but men the actors, Rousseau believed that there must be division of the sexes into separate spheres of life. If women were to enter into public life – economic life, social relations outside the family, government – they would risk losing their

essential connection to true human nature; if men were to be restricted from their participation in public life in order to fulfill domestic obligations, they would become weak and unable to prevent the economy, society and government from losing their morality and becoming corrupted.

For Rousseau, naturally occurring (rather than socially created) differences between men and women – physical differences, differences in temperament, differences in control of property and power – were underlying foundations of social morality; if any of those differences became effaced, the entire society risked losing its moral basis. Women, Rousseau believed, did exercise power in society, but they did so discretely through the influence of their feminine wiles on their husbands and the influence of their maternal love on their sons. Women, when they did participate in public life outside of the family – for instance, as actresses on the stage or in salon conversations – were inherently “frivolous” and unserious. Men, in turn, did not truly enjoy greater freedom since they remained obligated by their nature to serve as owner of family property, and master of the family’s interests. Men could not afford to be frivolous, and cede to the temptation to luxury (to which women might incite them) because of the constant need for the active engagement of male citizens in the civic life – the economy, the government, the policing and defense -- of the community. One of Rousseau’s lesser-known writings, a play on the classical republican theme of the *Death of Lucretia* (1754), illustrated this ideal. When the tyrant Tarquin became so overwhelmed by the sexual temptation of seeing Lucretia that he raped and murdered her, her brothers defended her honor by assassinating the tyrant – and thereby freed the Roman people from the tyrant and enabled them to found the republic.

Moreover, for Rousseau, the prospect of these roles becoming confused remained great, because women inherently exerted a tempting, corrupting, emasculating influence, against which men had to struggle. To this end, he advocated that women become immersed in their maternal and domestic responsibilities, so they would not have the time, energy or desire to seek social, economic, intellectual or political activities outside the home. In the *Social Contract* (1762) Rousseau described the role of women as one of “republican motherhood,” which some scholars have interpreted as an implicit “sexual contract” between men and women in forming families along these lines of strict hierarchy and division. In this way, these scholars
argue, Rousseau illustrates that Enlightenment political theorists were speaking very literally of gender
relations, when he wrote that “all men [and thus only men] are born free.”

Mary Wollstonecraft and the Vindication of Rights of Women

Not all the discussion about women’s sentimental nature was by men. In the context of a flourishing of
female literary and intellectual activity in the later eighteenth century, Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft
(1759 – 1797) stands out. Her Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) argued in straightforward manner
for the equality of women’s rights based on women’s equal abilities. Wollstonecraft left her despotic father’s
home at the age of nineteen and worked as a school teacher, a governess, and a translator for a radical
publisher, before beginning to write essays in her own name for an English intellectual periodical, the
Analytic Review in 1788. Her first pamphlet, A Vindication of the Rights of Man (1790) adopted the radical
rhetoric of the French Revolutionaries, itself greatly inspired by Rousseau, in one of the first critical
responses to Edmund Burke’s attack on the Revolution. Two years later, after the French Revolutionaries had
designated women as passive citizens, equal under the law but ineligible for voting rights or holding office,
Wollstonecraft responded by taking on Rousseau’s depiction of women as inherently domestic and unable to
participate fully in civic life. She blamed associations of women with luxury, sentiment and irrationality on a
society that refused to offer educational opportunities to women. Wollstonecraft drew upon the rationalist,
egalitarian arguments of such leading Enlightenment figures as Condorcet to respond directly Rousseau’s
sentimental arguments for essential differences in the mental and emotional abilities of the sexes. She urged
women to ignore “the prevailing opinion that they were created to feel rather than reason.” Invoking the
Enlightenment’s central motif of self-liberation, she urged women “to endeavour to acquire strength, both of
mind and body,” and to reject all signs of “susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of
taste” as symbols of weakness and dependence. Among late Enlightenment women writers who advocated
directly or implicitly recognition of women’s equality, Wollstonecraft stands out for her direct engagement,
as a woman, on behalf of women as having the bodily and mental facilities necessary for full participation in
human enlightenment.
Economic theory: Luxury, Commerce and Laissez-Faire

For many writers, however, women symbolized luxury. This association was not new to the Enlightenment. A concern, even an obsession, with the temptations of luxury had been central to the humanist tradition since the classical age. The tremendous economic growth, especially in overseas commerce, brought an unprecedented amount of luxury goods to Europe – Indian textiles, Chinese porcelain and lacquered wood, and precious metals from Latin America while comestibles such as tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco all become every day goods. This consumption reinvigorated a philosophical debate about luxury. Both classical republican thought and medieval Christianity inveighed against superfluity and luxury consumption as markers of vanity, sin, and a lack of virtue. Lockean empiricism similarly presumed that immoderate consumption represented the triumph of passions over reason, of short-term satisfaction over calculated, long-term interest. The predominant theory of early modern political economy – mercantilism – built from a presumption that consumption came at the expense of savings and therefore diminished the wealth of the nation. Rousseau, thus, updated this tradition – but he did so in the face of a new discourse, which defended luxury and consumption as signs of not only economic prosperity but the successful advancement of sociability, morals and of civilization itself.

Enlightenment defenders of luxury disassociated it from corruption and vice, focusing on the value that the processes of production and trade brought to society and the comfort and convenience for the consumer. Moreover, Enlightenment writers emphasized the way in which consumer goods specifically encouraged sociability, which would produce a stronger moral connection within society, and refinement of manners. Better manners in turn would facilitate greater civility and self-development. So, contrary to classical arguments, these authors advocated luxury as contributing to greater distribution of wealth, greater individual virtue and greater social liberty. Jacques Savary, director of French customs under Louis XIV, wrote a textbook for businessmen, widely read in the eighteenth century, in which he indicated that no less than “Divine Providence” had mandated commerce in luxury goods, since “It has dispersed its gifts so that men would trade together and so that the mutual need to help one another would establish ties of friendship
among men. This continuous exchange of the comforts of life constitutes commerce …which makes for
civility in life.”

The most important writer on behalf of luxury was the Dutch physician Bernard de Mandeville (1670 –
1733), who while living in London wrote essays and poems about moral and social issues of the day.
Influenced by Enlightenment’s questioning of received ideas, he questioned the traditional religious
 teachings about luxury as a vice. Mandeville argued that better food and clothing, cleaner and better-heated
living conditions, more functional and comfortable furnishings were unnecessary luxuries but necessities of
life in a modern city. Moreover, he suggested, an individual in pursuit of luxury through commerce, in an age
of economic prosperity and changing social relationships, served the common good as much as his private
interest. An individual who possessed the means to fulfill his self-interest and to satisfy his rational desires,
including luxuries, should be encouraged to do so, because such behavior would lead him to interact with
others in his society, including those less well off, rather than to isolate himself in hopes of preserving his
wealth. That interaction would provide the poor with opportunities for employment, to serve the desires for
luxury of the rich. Moreover, the interaction of the well-off and well-bred with the common people would, he
argued, contribute to the spread of manners and etiquette, as individuals would “assist each other to promote
and increase the pleasures of life in general,” including the pleasures of polite interaction. At the same time,
they would “have the least tendency to make others uneasy” – that is, they would learn how to avoid
offending and displeasing others, facilitating a human connection with others.

Mandeville’s writings on luxury culminated in his widely read Fable of the Bees (1729), which
featured the oft-cited concluding line that, “Private vices, by the dexterous management of a skillful
politician, may be turned into public benefits.” This thinking presented a new approach to luxury and a new
direction in European thought about the role of government in the distribution of resources— in short, political
economy. Savary, Mandeville and other early Enlightenment writers on commerce shifted the discussion of
luxury from the sinfulness of individual behavior to the benefits of social interaction and ceased to view the
material world as one of scarce resources insufficient to support human needs.

The new discourse of commerce combined two of the most important intellectual developments of the early modern period, Lockean psychology and Calvinist morality to describe human psychology as self-identifying with a community and to describe the material world as plentiful and growing. From Lockean psychology, it took the belief that humans could and would calculate rationally and pursue their long-term interests over their immediate appetites and instincts. From the Calvinist ideals of Mandeville’s native Holland (and of French Huguenots and English dissenters, such as Quakers) came the belief that a Christian man could engage socially, commercially and civically with others while remaining self-restrained in the face of vice and avarice. Moreover, this new economic theory presumed that the poor need not and indeed should not accept their fate in life, nor should poverty be accepted as a divine admonition towards humility. Instead, this new commercial discourse viewed the poor as economically underutilized and thus representing the potential for society to increase production -- rather than as extraneous parasites, whose consumption cut into society’s fixed resources.

Physiocracy and Laissez-Faire

Similar positions were taken up by other thinkers willing to break with traditional Catholic doctrine and mercantilist economic policies. A group of French writers, known as the Physiocrats, most notably the physician François Quesnay (1694 – 1774), sought to bring to the Continent what they considered to be the keys to England’s evident prosperity – its effective use of its land. The Physiocrats took their name from their central belief that all economic value originated in the land, and the only way to generate more value would be to make better use of the land. The Physiocrats pointed out that over the past two centuries, the major factors in European economic growth – the importation of precious metals from Latin America, of spices and teas from east Asia, and the manufacturing of textiles in northern Europe – could not be sustained. The amount of precious metals mined from the ground, goods harvested from wild plants and trees, or even the raw materials used to manufacture goods could not be increased. Only agriculture could increase the overall amount of goods available and thus increase society’s prosperity sustainably. The Physiocrats encouraged owners of land to make more efficient and profitable use of their land, through capital improvements such as
irrigation, manure as fertilizer to replenish the land, and selection of crops that produced more value and could be transported more readily for sale, such as potatoes instead of cereals. The Physiocrats argued against conservative views that higher-priced crops would not sell and that more production of food would only create surplus. Quesnay, writing in the *Encyclopédie*, pointed out that “good prices” for cash crops would generate more money for the landowner, higher pay for agricultural workers, and more tax revenues for the government. With more money available, owners could employ more workers, at higher wages; better-paid workers in turn could afford to purchase more food. The state would benefit by bringing to an end the cycles of severe scarcity and unrest that occurred every few decades. Governments could also encourage better circulation of goods to markets and ports by building roads and canals (without accumulating debt or spending its reserves of precious metals.) Such an approach effectively founded the modern discipline of economics by proposing that economic growth could be promoted by sound policy and that value, in monetary and other forms, was not finite.

To achieve this growth, Quesnay argued, several risky changes would be necessary. Most importantly, landowners would have to be allowed to consolidate the many small peasant plots devoted to subsistence farming into larger, more commercially run farms, as the English government had promoted successfully – even at the risk of displacing a large number of small peasants and their family, as had happened in England. Secondly, regulations on wholesale grain prices would have to be lifted, which risked causing sharp short-term increases in prices for bread in neighborhoods of the larger cities. Thirdly, taxes would have to be shifted from excise taxes on consumer goods (which limit domestic consumption) to taxes on land ownership, at the risk of riling nobles by violating their exemptions and privileges. Attempts to implement these changes were strongly resisted, by peasants who sued their lords to enforce existing *seigneurial* land-tenure agreements, by urban consumers who protested and rioted against higher bread prices, and by nobles whose Parlements refused to register royal edicts that sought to reform taxation. For the first of many occasions in French history, free-market economic reforms to promote greater prosperity in the long run foundered in the face of widespread political opposition to the short-term costs.

Despite the failure of such attempted reforms, including the Finance Minister and Physiocrat Jacques
Turgot’s ill-fated plan to abolish guilds and free the grain trade in 1776, the proposals for a liberalized, prosperous agrarian economy won over supporters across Europe, including the Neopolitan abbé Galiani As did Mandeville, the Physiocrats imagined a political economy based on commerce, sociability and prosperity rather than scarcity, subsistence and individual self-restraint. In their thinking, commercial exchange of goods would not produce, as traditional religious and moral thinking held, a sick society riven by sensuality, personal gratification and ostentation but a progressive society improving the material and moral lot of all its members. This new Enlightenment thinking about political economy became particularly important to Scottish philosophers of the “moral school,” including David Hume, and – and the University of Glasgow philosophy professor, Adam Smith (1723 – 1790).

Smith achieved prominence in the Scottish “moral sense” school of philosophy with his Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) and then traveled to France, where he read the Physiocrats’ criticisms of mercantilist policies that granted trade monopolies to certain companies. Indeed, in his Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776), Smith borrowed from the French Physiocrats the phrase “laissez faire [let it be]” to advocate that only “natural laws” regulate economic activity -- though he considered it “absurd” to expect tariffs or taxation be done away with. Smith specified a minimal but necessary role for government to ensure free markets by proper regulation of merchants to prevent monopolies, counterfeiting, fraud, predatory lending and outright “stupidity” by investors. Mercantilist doctrine, widespread across continental Europe, led governments to maximize foreign exports of goods to build up domestic reserves of currency. Mercantilists believed there to be a finite amount of goods (food stocks and luxury goods combined) and of money (in the form of bullion, or precious metals), so domestic consumption necessarily diminished the country’s total wealth. A country pursuing mercantilist policies thus sought to produce what it needed for its own subsistence and import as little as possible.

In arguing against mercantilism, Smith modified the Physiocrat view. He suggested that value could be increased not only through agriculture (because unlike the Physiocrats, he knew from England’s experience that increases in productivity from land improvements would not be unlimited) but above all

8 Wealth Of Nations, IV.ii.43; IV.ix.28.
through the use of capital to organize labor. Drawing on Locke (and anticipating Karl Marx), Smith espoused the “labor theory of value,” that the value of a good depended upon the amount of labor put into producing and distributing it. A workshop owner who invested in better tools or machinery could produce more goods in the same amount of time. If that owner could transport those goods to market using less labor, he could make more profit. Thus, Smith perceived in the labor theory of value an incentive for those who had or made money through sale of goods to invest that profit not in more raw materials or more workers but in improving the division of labor among workers.

Smith’s greatest contribution came in his combination of well established ideas. He combined the Physiocrat ideal of “laissez faire” with the labor theory of value to argue that neither local guilds nor national governments should enforce restrictions on the work of artisans or the sale of goods they produced. But Smith did not merely advocate a society in which individuals calculated and pursued personal interest to the exclusion of social or moral concerns. Indeed, the opposite. Smith adapted Mandeville’s conception that the pursuit of personal interest could benefit the public, by leading individuals (and, for Smith, countries) to interact with each other more frequently and more substantially. If each individual pursued that task to which he was by temperament and talent naturally best suited, and if each nation pursued those industries to which it was best suited by climate, natural resources, and disposition of its workforce, then all would maximize their advantagees. Thus, Smith introduced the economic concept of specialization and comparative advantage, not simply as tactics by which employers and governments could ensure growth in output and profitability – but as means to enhance the domestic quality of life. Contrary to nineteenth-century interpretations of Smith as an advocate of unregulated capitalism, he put great importance on workers’ purchasing power, consumer options and enjoyment of their work.

Smith presented such reorganization of the economy by capital as a natural development, resulting from human tendencies towards specialization and socialization. Individual workers would naturally have a particular disposition towards one or another skill, he reasoned; but working in isolation (as many skilled artisans did), a worker could not take advantage of his special skills. Only by being combined with other workers who had different natural dispositions could workers produce more efficiently. As workers
concentrated on a particular task in the production of any good – Smith’s famous example was the
production of “pins” – each would develop greater “dexterity” for that task and become more efficient at it.
Moreover, the division of labor in production offered the capitalist more opportunities to apply new
technology.

Although Smith had little direct knowledge of manufactories or of the significant technological
innovations in textile production already being introduced to the English economy by the 1770s, his writing
re-imagined labor, turning from the artisanal ideal of the individual worker who possessed all the skills and
owned all the tools necessary to produce handicraft goods to a vision focused on the application of capital as
the natural order of things. Although opposed to guild restrictions, Smith favored natural sociability among
workers. “Combinations” would naturally form as workers pursued their rational self-interest in relations
with employers, though at times workers would engage in “loud clamour” and “outrage” rather than
rationality – in short, strikes – to obtain higher wages. Smith also believed that “masters” (workshop owners)
would tend to form combinations. But he expressed concern that masters would not allow moral sentiment to
guide them in their interactions with workers and would instead seek to satisfy short-term instincts for profit
by engaging “in a conspiracy against the public or in some contrivance to raise prices” and lower wages. 9

Smith’s work represented in many ways a synthesis of Enlightenment theories of human nature as
inherently rational and seeking to maximize interest, as described by Locke, and as inherently sociable and
virtuous, along the lines sketched by Rousseau and the Scottish moral philosophers. Smith’s optimism (even
naivety) about the prospects for human happiness, his avoidance of Christian doctrine to explain human
behavior, and his belief that the classical ideals of self-cultivation and civic engagement could be synthesized
in the modern world crystallized the essence of mainstream Enlightenment.

Materialism: Radical or Utilitarian Enlightenment?

An alternative to the Scottish focus on sociability emerged in the Netherlands in the early eighteenth
century, as academics began to debate intensely the writings of Descartes and Baruch Spinoza. In the

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seventeenth century, Spinoza had used Cartesian logic to attack many of the dominant political and religious ideas and institutions. But pushing New Philosophy far beyond Descartes, Spinoza advocated a theory of materialism by which the mind generated thought entirely through the physical functioning of the body. The term “materialism” designated a philosophy of nature in which all actions resulted from the interaction of material substances, including the generation of ideas in the mind (including even moral ideas).

Spinoza’s materialism proved especially provocative, when he argued that the mind and the body were not essentially different but were “two aspects” of the same substance, which made up all of nature. This argument drew the ire of orthodox, scholastic theologians and philosophers who believed that it denied any role for the soul in human thought and behavior, and even more so because he argued that God too consisted of this same unitary substance. Moreover, Spinoza held that most of organized religion, especially Biblically based Judaism and Christianity, had no basis in truth and had nothing to do with human morality; instead, he called for toleration of different religious beliefs and practices and proposed a universal religion in which humans would come to understand the material, bodily basis of their ideas and thus generate morality based on reason alone, without need for superstition, fear or emotion.

In the eighteenth century, “Spinozism” generated even more hostility among those inclined towards each of the leading early Enlightenment schools of thought -- Cartesian rationalist “New Philosophy;” and those, especially in England, who supported the empirical approach to nature of Newton and Locke. While adherents of these different schools may have been willing to debate the nature of both the universe and God, all actively rejected Spinoza and materialism as contrary to human free will; critics argued that materialists conceived of man as merely a machine. Materialism thus represented an alternative – and some would say, more radical – strain of Enlightenment thought. To its critics, including intellectual and political elites attracted to mainstream Enlightenment thought, materialism appeared tantamount to atheism.

However, across the eighteenth century, the influence of materialism (usually without specific reference to Spinoza) became increasingly evident, notably in the work of the deist John Toland, who proposed that the entire universe, including God, had been composed of a single substance. By the middle decades of the century, materialism had made important inroads among French Philosophes and their
admirers across Europe. For instance, the physician Julien de la Mettrie’s *Man, a Machine* (1748) described the functioning of the human body and mind as a finely tuned mechanism, without a soul; upon the publication of his book, la Mettrie fled France for the protection of the Prussian King Frederick.

The German-born Baron d’Holbach (1723 – 1789), a highly admired aristocrat, introduced materialist ideas into the regular gathering of intellectual, political and social personalities that he hosted in Paris. D’Holbach also wrote treatises on nature, morality, and on mind that demonstrated the clear influence of Spinoza in denouncing organized religion and belief in divine powers as human inventions made out of “ignorance of natural causes.” Moreover, d’Holbach and other mid-century writers drew upon materialism to propose political reform by denouncing, as had Spinoza, political authority not based on reason and governments that did not improve the lives of the people. Many leaders in the past, d’Holbach wrote, had exploited human fear and ignorance and “created Gods, and …made them terrible” so that each subject of those leaders would remain “unhappy, because he was told that God had condemned him to misery.” Against such servility, “stupidity,” “renouncement of reason,” and “intellectual debasement,” d’Holbach advocated studying the material world, including the human body and mind, as well as the interaction of people in society, to develop a new moral and political system that could produce “eternal felicity” among men.

This last idea, about using reason to produce happiness, exerted significant influence on several aspects of later Enlightenment thought. The Swiss-born Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715 – 1771), an official in the French state and an active participant in Parisian intellectual life, adapted it into his treatise *On the Mind* (1758), an early expression of utilitarianism, the doctrine that social institutions should promote “the greatest good for the greatest number.” Although many, including some Philosophes, objected to the materialist argument that humans have no innate sense of morality, because they feared it could be used to condone immoral behavior, others built on Helvétius argument that humans develop their moral judgements by learning to prefer that which brings pleasure and to avoid whatever causes pain. This utilitarian ideal influenced many practical, Enlightenment reform proposals, such as the influential treatise (discussed in chapter 4) by Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764). Helvétius also influenced thinking about the human brain, such as the work of Etienne Bonnnot de Condillac (1714 – 1780). Condillac drew from John
England and France to materialism, empiricism and utilitarianism. In German-speaking Europe, it led in an entirely different direction. This alternative trajectory began with Gottfried Leibniz (1646 – 1716), a Prussian lawyer, diplomat and philosopher who early in his life showed how differential equations could be used, effectively inventing modern calculus. His deep interest in Cartesian logic led him to contemplate the origins of human knowledge and human morality in books such as *Theodicy, or the Problem of Evil* (1710) and *Monadology* (1714). Leibniz attempted to forge a universal theology and to understand nature as composed of irreducible substances known as “monads,” which never change their properties. By learning the qualities of monads, Leibniz proposed, mankind could logically deduce the answers to all questions about nature, including the nature of God. Leibniz inferred the qualities of God as perfection, unlimited power and benevolence. Such a God, Leibniz reasoned, could create any world that He wanted, but He would have only chosen to create “the best of all possible worlds.” Therefore, mankind need not try to improve the world but merely accept it; as it exists, the world illustrates the divine will for “pre-established harmony”.

Leibniz’s influence on German intellectual life discouraged the use of the experimental method to test hypotheses and encouraged the use of rational logic to prove the proposition that the world as it exists, including human behavior within it, is in fact the best of all possible situations. This philosophy, though similar in many respects to deism on theological questions, fundamentally differed with empiricism on the nature of knowledge, including human self-knowledge. For this reason, Leibniz’s “optimism” came in for
mercilessly mocking by the leading proponent of empiricism, Voltaire, in his satirical novel *Candide* (1759). The story of a young German whose travels across Europe, seeking his young love, lead him to encounter all sort of misery and misfortune; however, his tutor, Dr. Pangloss, inspired by Leibniz, explains that each awful thing Candide encounters is further proof that this is “the best of all possible worlds.” In the end, Candide abandons any belief in an overarching, divine plan and resolves to that the best that each person can do is to “cultivate our garden.”

Critics of empiricism gained a great ally in mid-century in David Hume, whose skepticism questioned whether we could really know from sense experience what caused events that we experienced. The combination of Leibniz’s relentlessly logical method and Hume’s penetrating criticism of empiricism as overly simplistic inspired Immanuel Kant, a young German seminarian, to undertake perhaps the most important philosophical advancement of the age. Although Kant’s most frequently cited work is his essay “What is Enlightenment” (1784), his most significant contribution came in later writings, in which he argued that the human mind does not understand the qualities of objects solely from experience, so that philosophers must seek to understand the concepts that occur in our mind from experience of those objects. That is, Kant de-emphasized the importance of physical entities as sources of ideas and argued instead that our ideas actually influence our experiences of objects in the physical world. Kant established the German “idealist” school of philosophy, which proved to be a significantly different legacy of the Enlightenment than the empiricist theories which pre-dominated in England and France. Kant also gave voice to a concern shared by rationalists and empiricists, materialists and idealists -- when he advocated in 1784 that “the public should enlighten itself” by “throwing off the yoke” to achieve, and use, intellectual freedom. Kant by no means advocated revolution, or even political reform, but he did call upon his contemporaries to gather, to think, to discuss and to argue – to make “public use of reason” to pursue “the interests of the community.” What, where and how this was done in the eighteenth century is the topic of the next chapter.