

**DEFINITION**

The **philosophes** were the philosophers of the French Enlightenment. They believed that philosophy was an important means of bringing about progress.

French Lights

The philosophes were aware that big changes were brewing and wanted to be on top of them, pointing the way to what they saw as a truer, freer way to think and live. Here are some of the more famous philosophes:

**Charles-Louis, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755)**

His ideas about the separation of powers in government exerted a strong influence on the U.S. Constitution.

**François Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778)**

A novelist and an outspoken social critic, he was a figurehead for the philosophes.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)**

He argued that the best political system is one that reflects "the general will" of the people. Otherwise, he saw civilization as having a bad influence on the individual.

**Denis Diderot (1713–1784)**

He came up with ideas about the importance of childhood in the development of the mind, anticipating Freud, and about the evolution of animals, anticipating Darwin. He also edited the massive *Encyclopédie*, a 17-volume dictionary of the sciences, arts, and trades that stands as a monument to Enlightenment thinking.

**Paul Thiry, Baron D'Holbach (1723–1789)**

His *System of Nature* denied the existence of God and replaced religious belief with a faith in nature and free will.

The Limits of Power

He especially admired the way England was governed. In Montesquieu's day, England was ruled by three separate ruling bodies: the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and the King. These three bodies worked together while limiting the power of each individual body. Montesquieu believed this form of government encouraged personal freedom, trade, and religious toleration.

Montesquieu was among the first to recommend that France adopt a similar approach, which came to be known as "the separation of powers." This principle remains part of the U.S. Constitution and the constitution of the French Republic.

God and Reason

While Montesquieu admired England for its government, Voltaire was one of many French philosophes who admired England for the advances it had made in empirical philosophy. In fact, Voltaire ran off to England after he was beaten and imprisoned in France for criticizing an aristocrat. Voltaire saw the new empirical thinking as pointing toward new ideas in all areas, including religion.



FASCINATING FACT

Voltaire, like Rousseau, was a novelist as well as a philosopher. Voltaire's novel *Candide* is a satire on Leibniz's view that this world is "the best of all possible worlds."

Freedom and Belief

Along with politics, religion was of primary interest to the French philosophes. Religion was a touchy subject during the Enlightenment. People held a variety of religious attitudes, ranging from blind obedience to the established Church to outright atheism. Those who did not wish to belong to the Catholic Church had to be careful, since religious intolerance was widespread and heresy was harshly punished.

Voltaire was one of the more outspoken critics of religious intolerance. He objected most strongly to the practice of torturing those who did not belong to the Church. Although Voltaire criticized excess in religious thinking, he was not an atheist. In fact, he criticized atheism.

Deism

Voltaire himself was a *deist*. A deist is someone who believes in God, but believes that God's will cannot be known and that God, having created the world, does little or nothing to influence its ongoing natural processes. Deism sees God as a kind of watchmaker with the world as his watch. God made the world and wound it up, and now he just lets the mechanism take care of itself.



DEFINITION

Deism is the belief in an unknowable God who set the world in motion at the beginning of time but has done little to interfere with nature since then.

Voltaire's deism is based on his philosophical skepticism. He believed that we cannot know about God one way or another, so we shouldn't make assumptions about how he should be worshipped. For this reason, Voltaire opposed organized religion; he believed that we should not assume that God doesn't exist just because organized religion gives a false impression of what God is.

Voltaire's deism envisions a God that allows people to exercise their reason rather than rely solely on faith. According to Voltaire, it isn't up to us to try to figure out what God wants. Instead, we should try to figure out how the world works and how people can best get along.

As a result, Voltaire objected to religious teachings, or dogma, as well as to the bureaucracy of the Church. He complained that men were given cushy positions within the Church based on their connections, and he regarded the practice of celibacy—abstaining from sex—among the priesthood as a sin against nature.

Diderot

During the Enlightenment, there was considerable disagreement between the philosophes and the people they criticized, especially the political and religious conservatives who wanted to keep power in the hands of the king and the Church. Philosophes also disagreed among themselves about philosophical, religious, and political ideas.

Voltaire, for example, criticized Baron d'Holback for his atheism and criticized Rousseau for putting down civilization. Even so, there was also general agreement about the potential for Enlightenment thinking to uncover the truth about the world and the importance of human thought and action within it. So much so in fact, that the philosophes carried out a huge group project intended to establish the new thinking and make it available to everyone.

This project turned out to be the 17-volume *Encyclopedia of Science, Art, and Trade*, edited by Diderot, including contributions from virtually all the major philosophers and scientists of France. Entries covered physics, art, morality, religion, politics, engineering, history, and commerce. Diderot wrote many of these entries himself.

The project was in danger of falling through a number of times, but luckily Diderot stepped in, took control, and brought it to completion. Although the project was huge in scope, the entries tended to adopt the Enlightenment point of view: human reason was leading to a clearer understanding of the natural world and to more just and free political organizations.

**FASCINATING FACT**

Because of his wide-ranging interests, Diderot was nicknamed "Pantophile," which means lover of everything.

Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau stands out among Enlightenment thinkers as a philosopher who defended the value of the emotions along with reason. He said that the need to fit in with society makes people lose touch with their feelings.

In contrast to most other Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau did not believe that reason was the solution to social problems. Instead, he believed that problems sprang from denying the importance of the emotions. Many Enlightenment thinkers regarded the emotions as dangerous forces that needed to be reined in by means of reason, but not Rousseau. He felt that we need to allow our emotions to surface.

The Noble Savage

Rousseau believed that human nature is inherently good, but that society makes people corrupt. In order to fit into society, you have to deny your natural desires, and this makes people deceitful and greedy. In civilization, everyone has to go around disguising their feelings and desires in order to be liked by those with more power.

According to Rousseau, the only individual in a civilized society who is truly free is the king, because the king is the only one who isn't trying to get in good with someone above him. In Rousseau's famous words, "Man is born free but is everywhere in chains."

Rousseau viewed civilization as bad, but he idealized Indians and others that he saw as “uncivilized,” by describing them as *noble savages*. The noble savage exemplifies the natural virtue of humanity uncorrupted by civilization. Such a being is free and honest because he doesn’t try to fool people into liking him the way civilized people do.

Virtue and Vice

Like the English philosophers Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau based much of his thinking on the idea of “the state of nature,” the condition of humanity before laws had been invented. Rousseau’s view of the state of nature differed from Hobbes’s and Locke’s. According to Rousseau, humanity in the state of nature was not only without laws, it was also without ideas of good and bad, virtue and vice. Ideas about good and bad were invented along with the rest of civilization in order to help people get along. In the state of nature, said Rousseau, these ideas were unnecessary.

Ideas of vice and virtue, according to Rousseau, were invented by civilized society and work to the advantage of the rich. They tend, in other words, to tell poor people what they can and cannot do so they won’t cause trouble. This idea anticipates Marx’s concept of ideology, which sees ideas as tending to justify the control of the rich over the poor.

The General Will

One major difference between Marx and Rousseau is that Marx focuses on the economic problems of the lower classes whereas Rousseau is mainly worried about emotional problems. Another difference is that Marx recommends collective group action to overcome the social control of the wealthy. Rousseau, in contrast, said more attention should be paid to the education of the individual. Education should help promote individual freedom and equality as well as counteract the negative effects of society.

Although Rousseau tended to place importance on the individual, he suggested that the laws of the state should be made in accordance with what he called “the general will.” The general will is what is good for society as a whole and works best when people freely agree to uphold it. It unites the ideas of collective good and individual freedom.



FASCINATING FACT

Rousseau wrote a novel, *Emile*, about a boy who is educated according to “natural” principles that had a powerful impact on theories of teaching.

The Least You Need to Know

- The French Enlightenment thinkers saw reason as the way to a freer society with more equality.
- Voltaire embraced empirical philosophy and was a harsh critic of religious intolerance.
- Deism is a religious philosophy that leaves space for reason as well as human nature.
- Diderot was responsible for editing the *Encyclopedie*, one of the most important works of the Enlightenment.
- Rousseau, unlike other Enlightenment thinkers before his time, emphasized the importance of feelings over the dictates of civilization.