

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

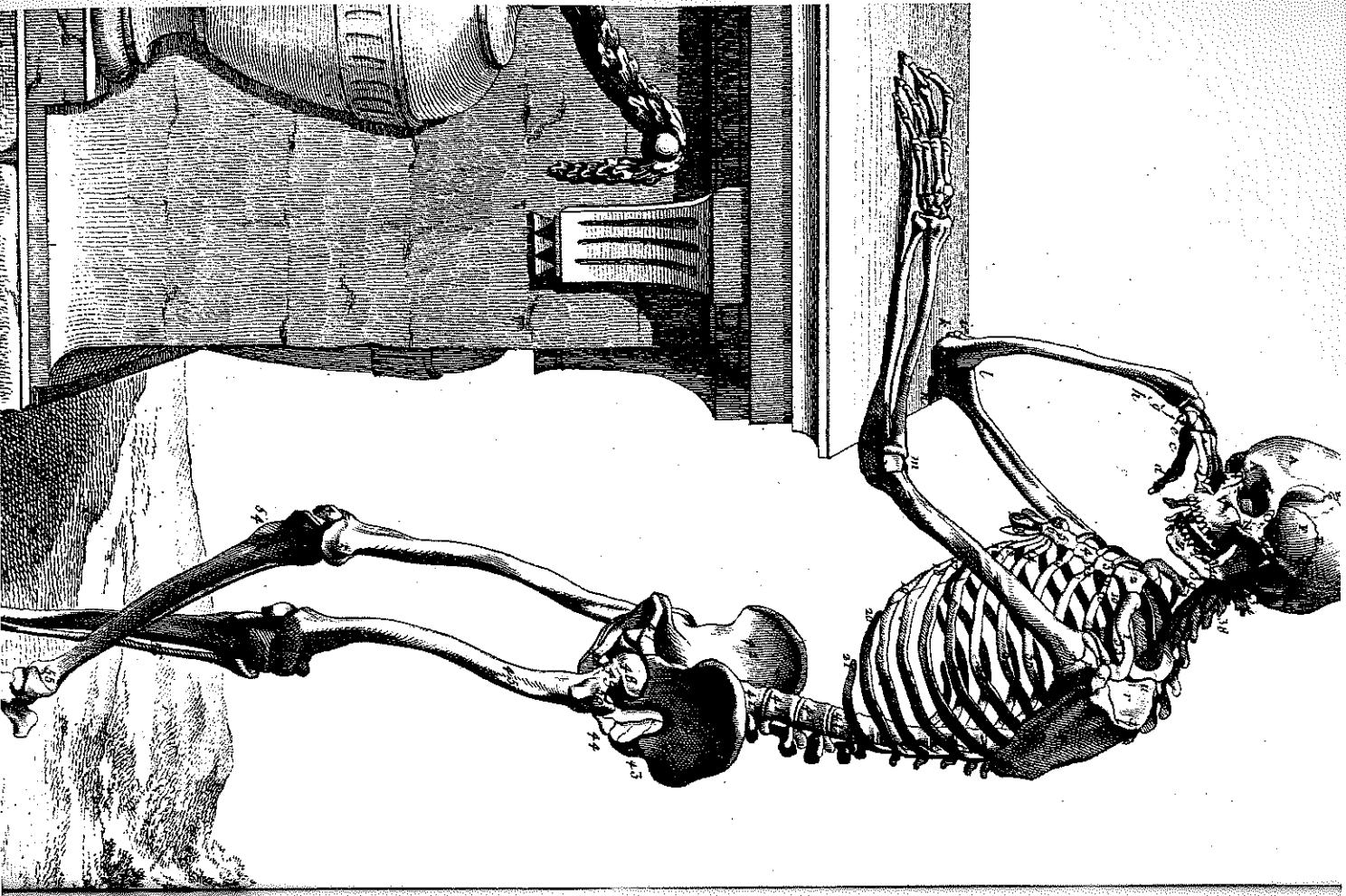
One of the central goals of an education in our own time is the development of critical thinking. Rather

than simply taking conventional wisdom on faith, we learn to stop and reflect on the arguments we hear, analyzing them for gaps and errors, exposing their unstated assumptions and evaluating their evidence. Instead of relying on external authorities, we put our own intelligence to work to distinguish between persuasive and misleading claims. Ideally, we learn to cultivate these habits in our everyday lives so that we become independent and skeptical adults, never carried away by mere prejudice or habit, and willing to examine all beliefs, including our own.

Critical thinking is a legacy of the Enlightenment. According to the great eighteenth-century French *Encyclopédie*, the enlightened person is one who "dares to think for himself . . . trampling on prejudice, tradition, conventional wisdom, authority, in a word, all that enslaves most minds." This was a bold new ideal, but one that had been in the works for a couple of centuries, as the principle of individualism had gained ground across Europe. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many educated people had begun to believe that they had a right to think and act for themselves, and to cast a critical eye on the pronouncements of priests and princes who had turned

out, after all, to be merely human like themselves.

But what did it mean to be human? Enlightenment thinkers typically distinguished humans by the particular faculty of reason: unlike animals, they argued, humans had the capacity to think through relationships between objects or events. They could establish cause and effect, and follow logical arguments. Mary Wollstonecraft, the founder of modern feminism, made the case that women had as much right to freedom and authority as men because they too had been given the faculty of reason by God. While many, like Wollstonecraft, assumed that reason was a divine endowment, a commitment to thoroughgoing rationalism could also lead people to reject established religions. Determined to resist superstition and prejudice, some influential voices of the Enlightenment asked searching questions about Christianity: if God had given human beings the capacity to understand cause and effect, for example, then miracles seemed to make no sense. Why would God violate his own rules? The French writer Voltaire went further. Christianity for him was fundamentally corrupt and unreasonable and should therefore be altogether destroyed. "Écrasez l'infâme!" he is famous for saying, "Wipe out the infamous thing!" Although there was by no means a consensus about religion among Enlightenment thinkers, almost all of them urged people to look not to divine or priestly authority but to their own experience—human perception, human intelligence, and human reason—to guide them to



An illustrated plate, *Anatomie*, from Diderot and D'Alembert's eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie*.

truth and action in the world. In an intellectual revolution that has left a lasting mark on our world, humans started to see themselves, rather than gods or spirits, as the sole sources of experience, knowledge, and judgment.

While Enlightenment thinkers were unperturbed by what they saw as irrational and self-serving religions, scientific knowledge provided them with a new ideal. Guided by human reason, scientists claimed to take nothing on faith: they turned assertions into hypotheses, performing rigorous experiments that could be verified by others. And science also lent human beings an exciting and perilous new prospect of supremacy, the capacity to conquer nature and harness its forces for human ends: "the power of man over matter," as Benjamin Franklin called it, as he forecast endless new capabilities, enabled by scientific discovery, that would keep improving the lives of human beings for a thousand years and more. His own discovery of electricity in lightning certainly fit this image of science. Putting this natural form of energy to human use has transformed the world in countless ways since Franklin's breakthrough.

With its potential for endless technological advancement, science promised a bright future. Perhaps all human problems could be solved: sickness could be eradicated, natural disasters averted, human emotion fully understood. A vast optimistic prospect opened up. It was important to many Enlightenment thinkers to leave the past behind and to focus on a future made possible not only by scientific knowledge but by a thoroughgoing insistence on improving human conditions. The very metaphor of enlightenment rested on an idea of progress. People were moving from an immature darkness—superstition, ignorance, error—into the mature light of knowledge and reason. Advances would come from rationalizing life, making it more efficient and thereby

increasing the store of human happiness. Enlightened governments were supposed to work not for a few privileged families but for the common good, committing themselves to maximizing the well-being of the people as a whole.

To be sure, there was a lot of debate about what the common good should be. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that debate was itself crucial to the process of enlightenment. He claimed that societies would make progress only if they opened all questions to public deliberation, inviting a full discussion of alternatives. This insistence on rational public argument gained strength as literacy rates rose, and more and more people eagerly entered into debates about law, politics, and science. Newspapers and magazines reached a growing swathe of society, making it possible to envision a genuinely open public sphere. Two new kinds of reference book—the comprehensive dictionary and the grand encyclopedia—were also meant to foster progress by disseminating information widely: "to collect all the knowledge scattered over the face of the earth, to present its general outlines and structure to the men with whom we live, and to transmit this to those who will come after us, so that the work of past centuries may be useful to the following centuries, that our children, by becoming more educated, may at the same time become more virtuous and happier" (*Encyclopédie*).

The promise of future happiness began to shape the political landscape. Many thinkers, eager to hurry along the path of social progress, made the case for sweeping social reforms—such as new legal systems to protect natural and inalienable human rights. Others, disgusted at the corruption of traditional aristocracies and clerics, saw no possibility of genuine progress without revolution. And in fact Enlightenment thinking would help to inspire the

dramatic political revolutions that broke out in the Americas and in France in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thomas Jefferson, for one, was very much a man of the Enlightenment. "We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead," he wrote, "nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

Freedom was an Enlightenment watchword. Aside from the freedom to use one's own reason against traditional authorities, the new science of economics, whose most famous exponent was the Scottish thinker Adam Smith, argued that money worked according to rational laws just like physics, and that the marketplace, left free, would produce ever-increasing wealth. No government need interfere with its workings. The free market became an influential model for thinking about human liberty.

But the Enlightenment faith in freedom only went so far. Few writers at the time believed in a fully fledged democracy, where anyone—male or female, rich or poor, white or non-white—could participate equally, and as they set limits on political rights and liberties, they often concluded that enlightened monarchs were more trustworthy when it came to acting with reason than the mass of people, who were too likely to be swayed by prejudice and superstition. Though Kant favored open public discussion, for example, he actively argued against republicanism, praising King Frederick the Great of Prussia for imposing a rigid order and keeping a "well-disciplined army." It was only under such restrictive conditions, Kant argued, that enlightened discussion could occur. He, like many other thinkers of his time, rationalized arbitrary authority and so helped to legitimate distinctly undemocratic regimes.

There was a grim side to the Enlightenment embrace of progress as well. Europeans saw themselves as

having emerged from a dark age—one they associated with immaturity and ignorance—and now, civilized and guided by reason, they were the only people who could understand and govern the world rationally. As Europeans set off from their native lands to find new markets for their products and new luxuries and natural resources to bring back, they increasingly encountered peoples whose lives were governed not by reason but by a great variety of traditions and faiths. All of these, according to numerous spokesmen for the Enlightenment, were primitive and unreasonable. What Europeans had begun as commercial interests overseas increasingly turned into imperial conquests, justified as the proper dominion of rational peoples over unreasonable and childlike ones. One had an obligation, it was argued, to bring the light of reason to those who lived in darkness.

What justified this worldview was a widespread faith in the universality of reason. Enlightenment was not only good for France or for Europe: it was what every nation needed. Enlightenment thinkers tended to be cosmopolitan in their outlook—imagining themselves as citizens of the world. Often they were travelers: Voltaire, for example, spent time in Britain, Switzerland, and Prussia; Wollstonecraft lived in Portugal and Ireland as well as her native Britain; and Benjamin Franklin was the American ambassador to France. And this international vantage point helped them to imagine that the light of reason would bring truth and understanding everywhere. Some even suggested that individual nations be abolished in favor of a single world state.

But others argued that reason could not be exported to everyone. It was during the Enlightenment that scientific theories of natural differences between the races emerged. Thus Thomas Jefferson argued that black slaves in the

United States were naturally inferior when it came to reason because they could not follow Euclidean geometry, and David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, could not think of any Africans who had shown "ingenuity." Others hotly disagreed. James Beattie criticized Hume's logic on the grounds of evidence gathered from around the world. "The Africans and Americans are known to have many ingenious manufactures and arts among them, which even Europeans would find it no easy matter to imitate," he wrote, pointing to the great civilizations of Mexico and Peru.

The question of racial difference was no matter of mere theoretical interest. The eighteenth century saw the height of the slave trade, as millions of Africans were forcibly taken to work land

in the Americas, and Enlightenment thinkers had to defend their own theories of human rationality and progress in this charged context. As reports of cruelty and exploitation reached them, most of the leading figures of the Enlightenment—even Hume—found slavery abhorrent and argued fiercely against it. The French *Encyclopédie* put it simply: the slave trade is a "business that violates religion, morality, natural laws, and all the rights of human nature." When it comes to global justice, the Enlightenment left us a double legacy. While its thinkers were responsible for the harmful new science of race and helped to justify European imperial domination, Enlightenment ideas would also support struggles for universal human rights down to our own day.

SAMUEL JOHNSON

"Dr. Johnson," as he was known in his own time (1709–1784), was a British novelist, poet, essayist, biographer, and most famously, the sole author of the 40,000 definitions in his *Dictionary of the English Language*, first published in 1755. As the market for printed books and newspapers expanded dramatically in the early eighteenth century, demand grew for a standardization of spelling and word usage. Dr. Johnson's was not the first English dictionary, but it remained the standard until the *Oxford English Dictionary* appeared a century and a half later. It included many scientific and technical terms as a way of disseminating knowledge widely.

*From A Dictionary of the English Language*¹

To ENLIGHTEN. *v. a.* [from *light*.] 1. To illuminate; to supply with light. 2. To quicken in the faculty of vision. 3. To instruct; to furnish with encrease of knowledge. 4. To cheer; to exhilarate; to gladden. 5. To illuminate with divine knowledge.

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