

THE SECULAR TURN



Chapter Objectives

- Describe the connection between the Enlightenment and the new science.
- List three terms that describe different aspects of 18th-century culture.
- Analyze three key Enlightenment ideas and their impact on western culture.

On the heels of the Scientific Revolution, the western world took a decidedly secular turn as the eighteenth century approached. Once again, our focus in this chapter will be on how the intellectual and cultural developments in this century still matter to us today. Why, after all, should we care what the philosophers in the eighteenth century believed about things? These dead philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau that we're going to be talking about: Why should we bother with what they thought? We're going to see that they cast a pretty long shadow over the world we live in today. It does matter what they thought and that's what we need to consider in greater detail.

Defining the Eighteenth Century

I want to first of all cover a few introductory things about this century. We'll start by listing the different terms and labels that we use to describe the eighteenth century. Then we are going to focus more specifically on two or three key doctrines or beliefs of the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Finally, we are going to look at Voltaire and

Rousseau as two eminent examples of eighteenth-century philosophers. They believed some very influential things that have shaped much of the direction of modern thought, down to our own present day. There are several different labels that we use for the eighteenth century. I want to briefly discuss each one of these. One term that we use to describe this century is the Age of Reason. Right there that kind of clues us in to this important theme, this important idea that we've been tracking since the Renaissance. The revival of rationalism is a way of looking at the world—the belief in human reason, which is so much a part of what Mirandola says and what Michelangelo and Da Vinci illustrate in their art. This belief in the rational faculty goes back ultimately to the ancient Greeks. We are going to see that this just carries right on through the scientific revolution right into the Age of Reason. Rationalism is going to become the dominant value, the dominant idea that man puts great stock in, in the eighteenth century. Taking their cues from science is what they are going to be doing—looking at the great achievements of the figure like Newton and then on that basis believing that the human mind, the faculty of reason, is capable of understanding all things.

The second term that we use for this age is neoclassicism or the Neoclassical Age. When we use the phrase Age of Reason, we are specifically referring to the philosophical values of the eighteenth century. When we

use the term the Neoclassical Age, we are emphasizing something different in eighteenth-century culture; we're emphasizing the arts, music, painting, literature, and architecture. We use the term neoclassical because we see a revival of classical art, of classical forms. The emphasis in classical art is on balance and harmony, things that are reasonable and rational. The neoclassical age sees those qualities as *classical* values that are grounded in reason.



Consider a few examples of neoclassical art in the eighteenth century. This is the age of Mozart and what we normally refer to as classical music. Mozart's symphonies are structured around complex principles of order and balance, again reflecting those classical values. We see this in the painting, in the sculpture, of the age as well. We see it in the architecture of the period. Thomas Jefferson was a neoclassical architect, going back to the balanced and orderly rational forms of Greco-Roman architecture. When we use the term neoclassicism, that's what we are referring to. We are looking at those sorts of rational qualities in the arts as we have illustrated.

Finally, the third term is the most general term and it's the one that's usually used as a kind of catchall term for eighteenth-century culture: the **Enlightenment**. Where does that term come from? Well the metaphor kind of gives it away in a sense, the idea of opening your eyes to the light and coming out of darkness into the light. That's how in the eighteenth-century, these very optimistic philosophers saw the condition of man at that time. Leaving the superstition, the darkness, as they saw it, of medieval religion behind and moving into the full light of reason. That's where the light

comes from as they believed you leave the darkness of religion behind and you walk into the light of reason.



The imagery is so powerful there when you put it in contrast with what Scripture says about the light and the darkness. Men love darkness, the Bible says, because their deeds are evil; and Christ is the light, the light of the world. All of that imagery is just something that you have to keep in mind as you think of this age of Enlightenment. These rationalists, who were steeped in human reason, believed that reason provided the light for mankind. But they were really just stumbling headlong in to the darkness and had no idea of the irony of that. Tragically they dragged all of western culture with them for the last couple of hundred years, as we are going to see momentarily.

Key Ideas of the Enlightenment

Let's look at the key ideas of the enlightenment. The eighteenth century, for the philosophers, was the crowning capstone of all of the achievements of science in the previous century. These eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers believed that reason and science were the foundation of

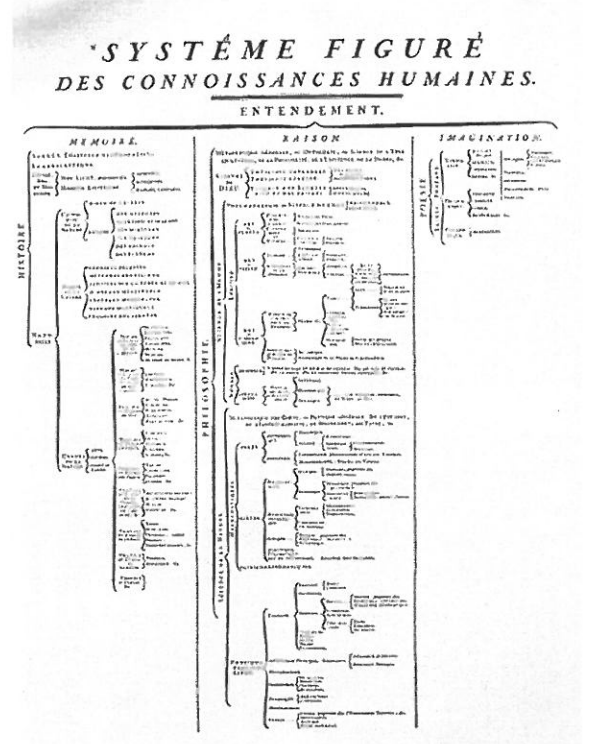
truth for modern man; tradition and faith were increasingly being rejected as superstition.

Note clearly what's being said here. It's not being implied that if you are going to be a Christian in the twenty-first century that you are going to reject science. No, the idea here is not that science is something that the Christian rejects, but rather the notion that science and reason are the foundations of truth is the idea being rejected. The notion that they are the foundation of what we ultimately know to be true about the world. The biblical belief is that Christ is the foundation, the way, the truth, and the life. What we ultimately know about truth is what God has chosen to reveal to us in creation through the Word of God and through His son Jesus Christ. That's really what's at stake, the foundation of truth. In the eighteenth century, reason and science became sort of the bottom plank on which everything else that man believes is true was going to be built on. When you use that phrase "something is true," in the modern world, what is usually meant is that it can be verified by scientific methodology. This concept of truth became well established in the eighteenth century.

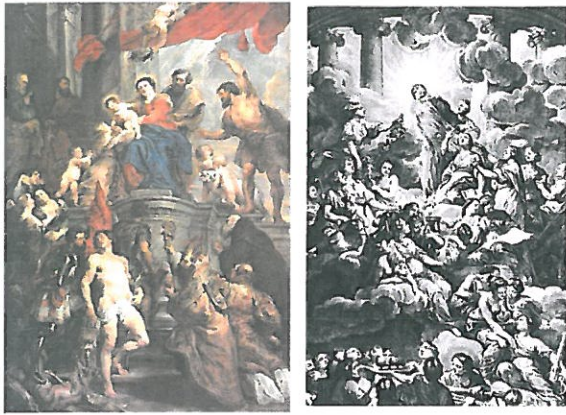
Also during the eighteenth century, philosophers began to teach the idea that man is born good, that he comes into the world good and that man—through his good instincts, his good nature, and his rational faculty—can make a better perfect world approaching social perfection. Man's nature is now deemed to be essentially good by the eighteenth-century philosophers; they believed that man is basically good and capable of social perfection. Well, you know that we've come a long way, far away from the truth of Scripture, when we start putting forth that idea.

The third doctrine that we are going to isolate here is that the goal of Enlightenment philosophy was to unify all knowledge under the all-seeing eye of reason. Look at the illustration taken from the back of the dollar bill. You see the eye of reason at the top of that pyramid; look at the light radiating out from that eye. That's what the hu-

man mind, with the rational faculty, can understand—the world of knowledge, organized within the human mind. This was the belief of Enlightenment philosophy. In the mid-eighteenth century, a group of French enlightenment philosophers decided that they were going to write a big encyclopedia, which we refer to by the French term, **encyclopédie**.



The French encyclopedia in the mid-eighteenth century was meant to be a compendium of all human knowledge. You can't do that now obviously, and you couldn't even do it then—and there was a lot less scientific knowledge then. It would be fair to say we don't have the storage capability, even with the growth of computer technology and the way the computers can process data in just milliseconds. We still don't have the capacity to store all knowledge. How could you possibly write an encyclopedia of, say, twelve volumes or so, and claim that this is all knowledge unified by the mind of reason? But that's exactly what they tried to do. We can look back smugly at the degree of arrogance that this displays, and yet the modern materialist also believes in the unifying power of human reason.



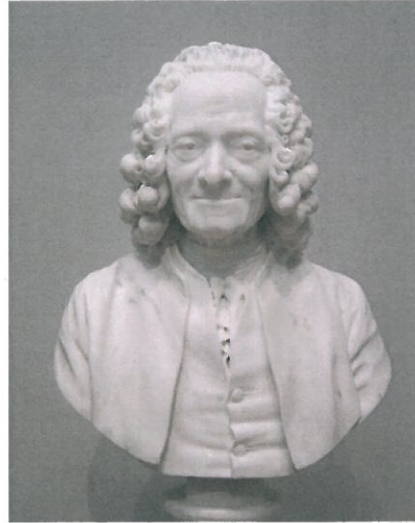
These two illustrations side-by-side really document the arrogance of what these men were trying to accomplish in the eighteenth century, and how much they thought the human mind is capable of. On the left, you see a painting of early seventeenth century by Peter Paul Rubens, with a traditional religious theme. You have the Virgin Mary and child and throne with Saints. It's very much a celestial painting of the glory of the Virgin Mary and so on. It's very much a Catholic painting in that sense, but very religious in orientation, and traditional in its theme. Would you say that the illustration right next to that looks similar to that in form and style and structure? It does look very similar to it in a lot of ways. But instead of the Virgin Mary being in the upper center of this illustration, which is the frontispiece to the encyclopedia, up in the upper center of the painting with light radiating out from its figure is a personification of reason, reason turned into a god.

They swapped out a religious icon for a new God—the God of Reason. And that tells the story of the modern age, of how religion was swapped out for another set of religious beliefs, another set of values. Revelation was swapped out for reason.

Voltaire and Rousseau

Let's start looking at the two towering figures of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment: Voltaire and Rousseau. Both of these men were very influential, but in the different ways. Voltaire was a kind of happy-go-lucky atheist. He was an atheist in an age where it was still a pretty uncommon thing

to be. There were not a lot of atheists in the eighteenth century, but it's not so uncommon today. One of the things that's really amazing is that you can see how much has changed in Western culture by Voltaire's time; he wasn't burned at the stake for some of the things he said. Clearly the world had changed a lot, including the role and the status of the Church within Western culture.



Voltaire, lived from 1694 to 1778, was a very brilliant man, a very witty man, and a great writer. He is known for his great literary style, and is also known as a philosopher of sorts. One of his very familiar statements is that "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him." That expresses a lot of what Voltaire believed—that God was a construct of the human imagination made because we need a moral standard in society. If we didn't have that, we would all tear each other apart; so we invented God. He was a very outspoken man in his beliefs and a brilliant man, but a man who was also a blasphemer. I think it's important to put what he said in context. My approach to him is always from a Christian perspective, so to look at him from another perspective, pick up humanities text written from a secular point of view. It's not going to describe him as a blasphemer. It's going to fall down in front of him and worship the memory of Voltaire. He is considered one of the great secular figures of the modern age. He is looked to and idolized by the secular modern world, because he was

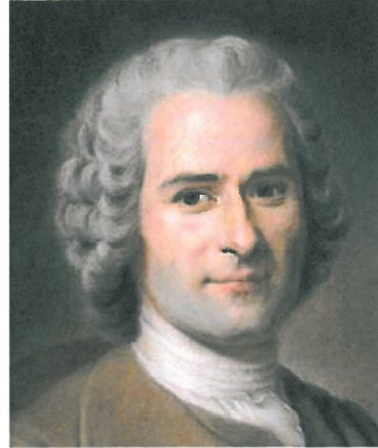
so hostile to faith. He was so hostile to the Church, what he described as called the tyranny of the Church. He was a "free thinker" in that sense, and so he's a hero to that secular mindset. But I see him as a blasphemer.

I want to give you a phrase that will make it much clearer. It's a statement of his, that's very hard for me even to state, because it is so blasphemous, but I want you to know who Voltaire is. If you run into him in other readings along the way, especially readings that celebrate this great and wonderful figure of Voltaire, I want you to think about this man who said "The blood of Christ, the blood of pigs, it makes no difference." That's a pretty remarkable statement. That's an incredibly blasphemous statement to make and this is the man, this is the atheist Voltaire. He said those things, because he was challenging in most radical way he possibly could, the authority of the Church. You can see why secular humanists and so on look to a figure like Voltaire with such approval. You can see how he inspired them, because the very same kinds of hostility that Voltaire expressed, which was uncommon in the eighteenth century, is now common today.

Look at how you can't call it "Christmas" in a public place anymore. It's just a secularized holiday. Christmas trees aren't Christmas trees anymore. They are holiday trees— whatever that is. In public schools, you can't sing Christmas carols that are of a religious nature. We are seeing the emasculation of the Christian heritage and the culture that lies behind it. This is Voltaire's legacy in many ways—not that he created all of that, but rather that he is indicative of that trend. You can see in him on the leading edge of Western culture. You can see that though his hostility to Christian faith was uncommon two hundred years ago, it is quite familiar to us now.

That's why it's important to talk about Voltaire and Rousseau. That's why it's important to see Voltaire for what he was, and to recognize that while he looks like a witty, genial, and brilliant figure—and certainly the history books make him out to be this wonderful figure—there is a darker reality

behind the façade. I don't for minute deny that he was a brilliant writer and intellect. But as a Christian, I also see him as a man who said terrible and destructive things about faith. Let's turn now to the equally important legacy of Rousseau who lived from 1712 to 1778.



In many ways, Rousseau was even more influential than Voltaire. He was not as brilliant a thinker, a man slightly demented in a number of ways. He was a very troubled man. That's pretty sad when somebody has been so influential and yet lived some a troubled life. You think about men like Freud and so on in the twentieth century who similarly have exerted tremendous impact on Western society. We don't take our clues from the right people, do we? Rousseau said that "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau more than anyone believed that man is born good and man is born free. Those notions of goodness and freedom are really, for him, interchangeable. When we come into this world you are good; your nature is good, or at least it's not bad. If you believe that, look around you for a moment. You have a problem, don't you? You have a big problem in accounting for the nature of the world around you. If man comes into this world good, why is everything is so messed up wherever we look? How do you account for not just individual acts of wrong, but how do you account for the big historic acts of evil in the twentieth century? How do you account for that? I believe that Rousseau has been proven wrong by both theology and by history. You can't look back at the

last couple of hundred years and conclude otherwise. Nonetheless, even though the twentieth century seems to have completely disproven him, you can stop and ask people on the street and find that people still believe that man is basically good.

It's a widespread belief—and so, again, you can see how far we have come from what scripture teaches. Scripture doesn't teach that man is basically good, and not even that that man is basically bad; scripture teaches that man is entirely depraved. How did Rousseau account for the sorry state of the world if he believed that man is good? He believed that it's society's fault. Man is good, but institutions are bad. So you come into this world good and you find yourself in a rotten family that ruins you. Then you go to school and you have rotten teachers, who turn you into a rotten and cruel person. Then you go into the world, into society, into a political and economic system that's unjust. No wonder people steal and kill and so on, according to Rousseau, because they've been made that way by society. Bad families and bad schools and bad social and political institutions have made them that way. Thus, man is born free but he gets enslaved. Think of how that contrasts with Scripture. Man is not born free; man is born in bondage to sin. You can see again just how clearly these philosophers are rejecting Scripture and the concept of personal, individual responsibility. Institutions, not individuals, are to blame.

This is important to note, as we look at Rousseau and the powerful legacy of his thinking. This way of thinking is still out there. It's how people think. Today, we call it social and political liberalism. Just think of the kind of the political debates in our own country that track along the spectrum from liberal to conservative philosophy. What is that the liberals believe about social problems? Liberals generally believe that bad institutions cause social problems. Bad things don't happen in society because people are bad, but because they've been conditioned that way by bad schools and bad neighborhoods. They've been conditioned that way by not having access to good jobs and good health care. And if you

think that way, it's very logical within its own system of assumptions. Liberals believe that man is basically good and institutions are bad; therefore, you become a creature of government. You think government is the institution that is going to tinker with these bad institutions and things better. So you try to legislate change; you try to make better people through better schools and better social benefits. If people have better homes and neighborhoods to live in, better access to healthcare, and so on, then they will be better people. We can trace that line of thinking back to Rousseau. He's the godfather of modern social liberalism. Liberalism is based fundamentally on a false view of human nature and that's the biggest split between conservatives and liberals. The conservative tradition has always been to view human nature as something that has to be restrained because man is not naturally good; whereas liberalism believes in the basic goodness of men.

So what are the consequences of this? Well, Rousseau had a profound impact on American education and the way we teach our kids. We don't want to screw them up with facts and so on; we just want them to bloom and blossom into the good little creatures they were meant to be. We want them to be individuals and so we don't want them to teach them facts; we want them just to develop. This is a very much an American theory of education that's had horrible consequences on American education—and these were Rousseau's ideas about education. Think as well of the consequences in the legal system. Somebody is brought into court, charged with murder. He stands before the judge and says, "It's not my fault. My parents messed me up." The jury agrees with that, and so he is acquitted of the crime. This is Rousseau's philosophy and its devastating legacy for us today—not just in education, but in the legal system and the political arena as well.

These are some of the profound impacts of the Enlightenment right down to today. Just as we found with the Scientific Revolution, the influence continues on. And so that's why we study it; that's why we go to the past to try to figure out the present world.