

The Enlightenment



The Enlightenment



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Contents

Introduction	5
Learning Outcomes	6
1 'The Enlightenment'	7
2 The Enlightenment and its mission	8
2.1 Definitions	8
2.2 The <i>Encyclopédie</i>	10
2.3 The pervasive influence of Enlightenment	15
3 Enlightenment, science and empiricism	17
4 Enlightenment, religion and morality	20
4.1 Constant human nature	20
4.2 Materialism	21
4.3 Responses to religion	23
5 Enlightenment and the classics	25
6 The Enlightenment on art, genius and the sublime	30
7 The Enlightenment and nature	35
8 The forces of change: towards Romanticism	38
8.1 The forces of change: towards Romanticism	38
8.2 The increasing status of feeling	38
8.3 Enlightenment, humanity and revolution	44
8.4 The Enlightenment and modernity	52
9 Conclusion	57
9.1 Key characteristics of the enlightenment	57
9.2 Cultural shifts: from Enlightenment to Romanticism, c.1780–1830	58
Keep on learning	59
References	59
Acknowledgements	61

Introduction

The course will examine the Enlightenment. To help understand the nature and scale of the cultural changes of the time, we offer a 'map' of the conceptual territory and the intellectual and cultural climate. We will examine the impact of Enlightenment on a variety of areas including science, religion, the classics, art and nature. Finally, we will examine the forces of change which led from Enlightenment to Romanticism.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the cultural climate that existed as the Enlightenment began
- understand the main characteristics of the Enlightenment
- demonstrate an awareness of the cultural shifts and trends leading from Enlightenment to Romanticism.

1 'The Enlightenment'

What a change there was between 1785 and 1824! There has probably never been such an abrupt revolution in habits, ideas and beliefs in the two thousand years since we have known the history of the world.

(Stendhal, Racine and Shakespeare, 1825; 1962 edn, p. 144)

This course looks at a period of 50 years or so during which European culture underwent one of the most profound and far-reaching changes in its history. This occurred against a background of political and social turmoil and transformation equally unprecedented, marked by revolution, war and the beginnings of industrialisation. The period saw the interface of two fundamental cultural movements: Enlightenment and Romanticism. The transition from the first to the second has been described as 'the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred' (Berlin, 1999, p. 1), one that 'cracked the backbone of European thought' (Isaiah Berlin, quoted in Furst, 1979, p. 27), and it continues to impact on our ways of thinking in the twenty-first century.

In order to help you get to grips with the nature and scale of the cultural changes that took place, we intend to offer a 'map' of the conceptual territory, the intellectual and cultural climate. As we proceed, we shall point to some of the key texts of the period, but we shall continue to concentrate largely on the Enlightenment, drawing your attention to the major figures and works characteristic of this movement. We shall ask you to watch video clips in which some important aspects of the Enlightenment are discussed further, and to attempt the corresponding exercises set in the Audio-Visual Notes. We shall also outline briefly some of the main changes that began from about 1780, principally with regard to the shift towards Romanticism.

As you work through this course please bear in mind the learning objectives specified above. At this stage you are asked simply (1) to gain a basic understanding of the cultural climate that existed as the historical period we shall be studying began; (2) to grasp the main characteristics of the Enlightenment; and (3) to be aware of some of the cultural developments leading from Enlightenment to Romanticism. You will encounter in this course a great deal of supporting detail that you will *not be* expected to memorise.

In order to help you to work smoothly through the course, we have highlighted in bold the summary points that we expect you to absorb. We have also highlighted in bold at their first mention the names of the institutions, historical phenomena and authors of texts that featured prominently at that time.

2 The Enlightenment and its mission

2.1 Definitions

'The Enlightenment' is used to refer:

1. to a chronological period (roughly, the middle and late decades of the eighteenth century between around 1740 and 1780), often also called 'The Age of Reason'; and
2. to the unprecedented focus on a particular set of values, attitudes and beliefs shared by prominent writers, artists and thinkers of that period.

There were changes of emphasis depending on date: it is common to distinguish, for example, between early and late Enlightenment attitudes, while the half-century beginning around 1680 is often thought of as the pre-Enlightenment. There were also different 'varieties' of Enlightenment depending on national, social and political contexts. The sweep of the Enlightenment was enormous: from Lisbon to Saint Petersburg and from Edinburgh to Naples. Enlightenment culture spread from one nation to another, defining a pan-European consciousness of tremendous force. Each nation added its own dimension. In France, for example, there was a much greater sense of opposition to the (Catholic) Church than in England, where the religious establishment was perceived to be far less oppressive. It is agreed that the Enlightenment was at the height of its influence in the 1760s and early 1770s. Of its most representative figures in France, Voltaire died in 1778 and Diderot in 1784 (see Figures 1 and 2). There is also a consensus that certain key attitudes characterise what we may describe as an Enlightenment outlook.

The Enlightenment consisted, in essence, of the belief that the expansion of knowledge, the application of reason, and dedication to scientific method would result in the greater progress and happiness of humankind. The Enlightenment outlook was buoyant, reformist and humanitarian. The archetypal Enlightenment thinker was confident that the world is ultimately both rational and beneficent, that nature, including humanity, is essentially good or at least not innately depraved, and that people have the potential to improve themselves and their environment and to make the world a better place.



Figure 1 Jean-Antoine Houdon, Voltaire, 1778, bronze, 45 x 20.8 x 21.2 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: Getty Images



Figure 2 Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, Denis Diderot, 1777, bronze, 52 x 34.5 x 25.5, Louvre, Paris. Photo: © RMN/G.Blot/C. Jean

Among the factors that gave particular credibility to this belief one ranks high: the epoch-making discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) at the end of the seventeenth century regarding the motion of the planets and gravitational force. Newton's achievements had a profound and lasting impact that spread far beyond the sphere of physics. They suggested that the natural world could be explored and understood, and that nature and everything in it was governed by underlying 'laws'; that there were rational, universally valid answers to the questions asked by an enquiring mind; that for every effect there was an identifiable cause, for every natural phenomenon an explanation, a category and a definition, if only we try hard enough to find it. This confidence in reason or intellect lies at the heart of the Enlightenment.

2.2 The *Encyclopédie*

The text that best exemplifies and embodies this outlook is the French *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonne des sciences, des arts et des metiers* (*Encyclopédia, or an*

Analytical Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Trades), published in Paris between 1751 and 1772 in 28 volumes and accompanied by 11 volumes of illustrative plates. (Further supplementary volumes were published almost up to the French Revolution in 1789.) The main editor of the work was Denis Diderot (1713–84, pronounced Dee-der-oh), assisted in the early stages by Jean d'Alembert (1717–83). The *Encyclopédie* certainly took seriously its remit of collating and communicating all available knowledge in the interests of progress. The following statement from one of Diderot's many articles in the *Encyclopédie*, the one entitled 'Encyclopaedia', sets out the basic manifesto of the Enlightenment:

The aim of an Encyclopédie is to bring together the knowledge scattered over the surface of the earth, to present its overall structure to our contemporaries and to hand it on to those who will come after us, so that our children, by becoming more knowledgeable, will become more virtuous and happier; and so that we shall not die without earning the gratitude of the human race.

(Diderot, 1755, p. 635; trans. S. Clennell)

In that one brief statement we find the essence of the Enlightenment credo: that increase of knowledge will produce happier, more virtuous people. The message is one of universal application, appropriate to the entire human race. It was self-evidently better to be right than to be wrong: that is, to have a correct understanding of things, the relationship between them, and the 'laws' that governed those relationships. To be informed was manifestly better, more virtuous, than to be ignorant or prejudiced. Hence, as Diderot continued, all knowledge was good in itself; the discovery of truth in any field of human activity was a contribution to the advancement of human knowledge, and therefore to the advantage and ultimate happiness of humanity; the *Encyclopédie*, whose purpose was to spread that knowledge, was a worthy instrument of the Enlightenment. 'Enlightenment' itself (and its variants in other languages) signified the emergence of light and the dispersion of the clouds, particularly the clouds of ignorance, superstition, prejudice, oppression, dogma or myth. As Diderot insists later in the same article:

All things must be examined, debated, investigated, without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings ... We must ride roughshod over all these ancient puerilities, overturn the barriers that reason never erected.

(Gendzier, 1967, p. 93)

Many of the authors who contributed to the work – the encyclopedists – were known as *philosophes*. These were not philosophers in our modern sense of the word, but a loose-knit group of like-minded intellectuals and cultivated, sociable and lively writers. Sharing a common view of the *Encyclopédie* and its mission, they were immensely knowledgeable in an age when it was still possible to have a good grasp of most branches of learning. Of all the encyclopedists, it was perhaps Francois Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778) who best personified the French Enlightenment: not only in his enormous and varied literary *oeuvre*, ranging from neoclassical tragedy to modern history and from Newtonian science to literary criticism, but also in his passionate, energetic, highly charged and publicised commitment to Enlightenment values, a commitment which seemed to intensify as he grew older. As 'the patriarch of Ferney' in the 1760s and 1770s, he settled in semi-exile at Ferney, near the Swiss border; he also kept a house in Geneva as a bolt-hole in case of trouble from the French authorities. Voltaire was known throughout Europe for his active intervention in humanitarian causes and his incessant attacks on abuses of every kind, particularly abuse of power by the Catholic Church and associated miscarriages of justice.

All this was given sensational coverage by his flair for publicity, his Europe-wide contacts among influential people, including crowned heads – notably Frederick the Great of Prussia and Empress Catherine the Great of Russia – and above all by his inimitable style, pointedly ironic, forceful, mischievous, malicious and funny. Voltaire never missed his target. He made the authorities, the ecclesiastical perpetrators of superstition and cruelty, smart. He made them look not merely wrongheaded, wicked and unjust, but more – he made them look ridiculous. Voltaire's style also reflects another Enlightenment characteristic: its even, moderate temper, urbane, measured and witty. Passionately as Voltaire felt about fanaticism, cruelty and injustice, his strength of feeling was the more effective for its control, the rippling, amusing surface elegance beneath which a biting wit and irony fizzed, flashed and exploded. Voltaire's best-known work, which best reflects his character and style, is his 'philosophical tale' *Candide* (1759). Here, for example, is a statement by one of its main characters, a part-Spanish valet Cacambo, about the colonial impact of the Jesuit Fathers in Paraguay (the Jesuits were a body of Catholic missionaries):

I know how the reverend fathers govern as well as I know the streets of Cadiz. It's a wonderful thing, their system of government. The kingdom is more than three hundred leagues across; it is divided into thirty provinces. The reverend fathers own everything, and the natives nothing. It is a masterpiece of reason and justice.

(Voltaire, 1981, p. 88; trans. Lentin)

This French Enlightenment tone and temper – detached, ironic and at times wickedly or darkly humorous – should be remembered when we come to discuss the very different Romantic temperament.

Although the term *philosophe* was French and applied mainly to thinkers from that country, it was also applied to intellectuals of any country who were sympathetic to an Enlightenment approach. Of the encyclopedists themselves, Baron d'Holbach (Paul Henri Dietrich) was a German expatriate and **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712–78) was Swiss. 'My dear Davy,' Diderot wrote to the Scots philosopher **David Hume** (1711–76), 'you belong to all nations ... I flatter myself that I am, like you, [a] citizen of the great city of the world' (quoted in Gay, 1968, p.13). Diderot spoke for the thoroughly cosmopolitan spirit of the Enlightenment. French was the common language of the Enlightenment, as the Berlin Academy of Arts and Sciences acknowledged in 1783 when it set an essay competition on 'the universality of the French language'. The publications of the French *philosophes* were followed by an eager, albeit elite, readership across Europe. 'I see with pleasure', Voltaire wrote to a Russian in 1767, 'that an immense republic of cultivated minds is being formed in Europe' (quoted in Sorel, 1912, p. 166; trans. Lentin). There were varieties of the Enlightenment in Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria and Russia; there was a distinct and distinguished Scottish Enlightenment (of which Hume was a leading figure), and in England there were even a Midlands Enlightenment and a Manchester Enlightenment. But it was in France that the rational, reformist agenda of the Enlightenment found its most forceful expression (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 Anicet Charles Gabriel Lemonnier, *A Reading in the Salon of Mme Geoffrin*, 1755, oil on canvas, 129 x 196 cm, Châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau, Paris. Photo: © RMN/Arnaudet. The actor Lekain is reading Voltaire's play *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (*The Chinese Orphan*) before a bust of the then exiled author

The *philosophes* saw themselves as engaged in a battle for minds; they appealed to something which they saw and cultivated as a new factor in European society: public opinion. It was with public opinion in mind that they criticised existing institutions in France and what they saw as a corrupt and ineffective absolute monarchy in alliance with a corrupt and repressive Catholic Church. While they had friends in high places who assisted the project, the *Encyclopédie* had a stormy publication history, since its content and tone went far beyond the conventional remit of summarising and categorising knowledge. Its social and political polemic often operated through a subversive system of cross-referencing and ironic word play in an attempt to circumvent strict censorship laws, but this did not prevent several serious delays to publication of the work and determined opposition from powerful quarters.

Exercise 1

So far in this section you have been introduced to the main mission of the Enlightenment. Try now to stand back from the detail of the section, and summarise in about 50 words what you see as the main characteristics of that mission.

The main characteristics of the Enlightenment's mission were:

1. a confidence in reason or intellectual enquiry to bring greater happiness and progress to humanity;
2. a belief that all aspects of the human and natural worlds are susceptible of rational explanation; and
3. the desire to battle against ignorance, dogma, superstition, injustice and oppression.

How did you fare in this exercise? Did you write much more than the summary discussion set out in the discussion above? If so, it may be that you need further practice in the skill of extracting key points and summing them up concisely. You have encountered so far in this section a general exposition of the main characteristics of the Enlightenment mission, followed by some more detailed discussion of historical examples: the *Encyclopédie* and the writings of Voltaire. This combination of main points interwoven with or succeeded by illustrative detail is commonplace in academic writing. Detail has a useful function and is essential in academic study. It both illustrates and validates general claims. But its overuse can bring the risk of obscuring the main points of an analysis: 'not seeing the wood for the trees'. The required balance between analysis (the ordering and identification of a number of interrelated points relevant to a set question) and illustrative detail or textual evidence will vary.

Try to keep in your mind this distinction between detail and argument as you read the rest of this course. Often the main point being made will be highlighted in some way – perhaps by being stated at the opening of the section or at the beginning or climax of a paragraph, although some paragraphs (such as the paragraph above on Voltaire) will be devoted almost exclusively to the exploration or discussion of particular cases. Try to read the course so that you track the main points carefully and read through the examples more quickly. In order to help you develop this skill of prioritising your attention as you read, we have highlighted summary points in bold in each section of this course. We have also followed a procedure of including in each section the following elements, which appear in different combinations, proportions and sequences:

1. a brief statement on one or more main points relating to the Enlightenment;
2. some specific historical examples (including some on the introductory video); and
3. some indication of the ways in which the main texts of period are located in the general 'landscape' of the Enlightenment.

Exercise 2

Open the Audio-Visual (AV) Notes by clicking on the 'View document' link below. After you have viewed the video ('The *Encyclopédie*') and attempted the exercise relating to it in the notes, return to this course.

Video 1 'The Encyclopédie' Click within the blank screen to play video

Video content is not available in this format.

[The Encyclopédie](#)

Click on 'The Encyclopédie' to read the notes and exercise for video 1

[The Encyclopédie](#)

Summary point: the main mission of the Enlightenment was to increase human happiness and progress by the application of reason. Enlightenment thinkers used reason or intellect to fight against dogma, superstition, injustice, prejudice and oppression. They saw all areas of human enquiry as susceptible to reasoned understanding of cause and effect, ultimately expressible in terms of universal laws or principles.

2.3 The pervasive influence of Enlightenment

You will find in this course in one form or another the pervasive influence of the Enlightenment. Sometimes this influence is buried in deeply ambiguous texts such as **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's** (1756–91) opera *Don Giovanni* (1787), which includes a famous toast to 'liberty'. The opera is seen by some as an attempt to subject to critical scrutiny the behaviour of at least one member of a corrupt eighteenth-century aristocracy and the social or class structure that facilitated his egoism. The **French Revolution** also unleashed a tremendous blast of energy which inspired its leaders with a sense of missionary zeal. Those involved in the Revolution believed, initially at least, that the Enlightenment had pointed the way towards political reform and the kind of system in which its principles could be put into practice. Many across Europe shared this enthusiastic belief. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) hailed the opening stages of the Revolution as 'the enthronement of reason in public affairs' (quoted in Barzun, 2000, p. 430).

Many aspects of **Napoleon's** (1769–1821) regime – and certainly the image he sought to project of it – exemplify the intellectual and moral appeal of the Enlightenment. During the Revolution and on an even greater scale under Napoleon, the French not only prided themselves on being what they called *la grande nation* (the great nation) but also spilled across their frontiers and expanded France by force of arms. In the process they introduced across most of Europe systems of rational administration and modern laws and institutions owing much to the Enlightenment. The French saw themselves as bringing freedom, light, reason and modernity to Europe, and it is significant that their belief was long shared by many who came under French rule. This was perhaps an intense magnification of the general self-perception of enlightened Europe as a whole as the cultural centre of the world. Not that Europe was inward-looking: when Napoleon was sent to conquer Egypt from the Turks in 1798, he took with him 167 scholars, scientists, archaeologists and artists to map, survey, explore and describe the country; to investigate the antiquities of the land of the Pharaohs; and to publish their findings in 20 massive volumes. They were as fascinated by the civilisation of ancient Egypt as they were contemptuous of the backwardness of modern Egypt, and Napoleon briefly ruled the country with a rod of iron. The whole enterprise was an example of 'the Enlightenment in action' (Barzun, 2000, p. 445). Of course, this willingness to look beyond Europe was often motivated by commercial colonial interest. The East India Company, founded in London in 1600 and extremely active in the eighteenth century, was a classic example of a commercial enterprise established by the British to maximise profits.

The Enlightenment mission is evident in *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799) by the Scot **Mungo Park** (1771–c.1805); the author, sponsored by the African Association on a voyage of exploration, built on the tradition of the knowledge-extending expeditions to the Pacific of Captain Cook. He wrote about his travels in order to increase his readers' knowledge of African geography and societies. To stereotypical European perceptions of Africans as 'barbaric', Park brought corrective insights based on his own first-hand observation and experience. This was one of many examples of reason correcting prejudice. Even as Romanticism was gaining pace in literature and art, the Enlightenment's concern for accurate facts and sound reasoning persisted in many areas of intellectual enquiry. The Evangelical Christian and anti-slavery campaigner **William Wilberforce** (1759–1833), in his thoughts on religion and slavery, adopted the archetypal Enlightenment procedure of structured, rational 'enquiry', seeking out the relationship of cause and effect in society's responses to these burning issues. *Thoughts and*

Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery (1787) by **Quobna Ottobah Cugoano** (1757–c.1800) followed the *Encyclopédie* in applying rational, critical understanding to the practice of slavery in order to support the abolitionist cause, while other Enlightenment thinkers were using reasoned argument to support its retention.

Robert Owen (1771–1858) applied the critical reformist spirit of the Enlightenment in *A New View of Society* (1813–16), in which he set out his views on the management of industry and its workers based on his experience at the mill in New Lanark. He shared the Enlightenment's faith in the improvement, through the application of reasoned principle, of the individual and of society at large, and he used these beliefs to shape the work and the domestic environment of the mill-workers. Among the progressive Enlightenment thinkers of Manchester who debated topics as diverse as population growth, poverty, health, education, commerce and philosophy, Owen had gained knowledge which he saw as 'useful' in educating and reforming the character of these workers, thus ensuring their productivity and, he believed, their happiness. For Owen, as for most Enlightenment thinkers, the creation of happiness was a rational business, with identifiable causes and effects that could be formulated as universally applicable principles. The world did not have to be a vale of tears or a preparation for other states of existence. The very object of government, indeed, was held to be the maximisation of pleasure, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or – in the words of the Declaration of Independence with which the American revolutionaries set Europe the example of deliberate, purposeful, rational political change – 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. Owen identified himself explicitly with the Enlightenment cause by taking a stance against the 'ignorance and consequent prejudices that have accumulated through all preceding ages' (Owen, 1991, p. 70), and was representative of that branch of the Enlightenment concerned with *practical* reform.

The application of reason and knowledge to practical reform was also the concern of the British **Royal Institution**, founded in 1799, which promoted the study and popularisation of science in the interests of practical improvements in, for example, agriculture, industries such as leather tanning, and, more broadly, the condition of the poor and the prosperity of society in general. The scientist **Humphry Davy** (1778–1829) expressed his commitment to the discovery of universal principles or laws in chemistry. Napoleon drew up his Civil Code and introduced it across much of Europe, inspired by the Enlightenment idea of laws and principles of universal application. Beneath all of these spheres of enquiry covered in the course, there lay a terrific confidence in all-embracing explanations.

This desire to extend and increase knowledge was evident in concerns of a less overtly practical nature. **Edmund Burke** (1729–97), in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), set out to define, categorise and explain the nature and causes of the responses to art experienced and discussed by his contemporaries. Burke sought, in relation to aesthetics, to identify the properties of 'the beautiful', to distinguish the merely beautiful from 'the sublime', and to pinpoint their effects on the beholder. **Sir John Soane's** (1753–1837) museum, given to the nation in 1833, can also be seen as an example of this classificatory and educational impulse, this time in relation to physical artefacts. This desire to classify, demystify and explain aesthetic experience had a profound effect on theorists, writers and painters, who felt that art itself was susceptible of rational explanation and control. In every art, craft and field of learning, knowledge was power and the key to progress. The Enlightenment mission penetrated all aspects of human thought and activity.

3 Enlightenment, science and empiricism

The Enlightenment's dedication to reason and knowledge did not come out of the blue. After all, scholars had for centuries been adding to humanity's stock of knowledge. The new emphasis, however, was on *empirical* knowledge: that is, knowledge or opinion grounded in experience. This experience might include scientific experiments or firsthand observation or experience of people, behaviour, politics, society or anything else touching the natural and the human. For any proposition to be accepted as true, it must be verifiable, capable of practical demonstration. If it was not so verifiable, then it was an error, a fable, an outright lie or simply a hypothesis. Although Enlightenment thinkers retained a role for theoretical or speculative thought (in mathematics, for example, or in the formulation of scientific hypotheses), they took their lead from seventeenth-century thinkers and scientists, notably Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke (1632–1704), in prioritising claims about the truth that were backed by demonstration and evidence. In his 'Preliminary discourse' to the *Encyclopédie*, d'Alembert hailed Bacon, Newton and Locke as the forefathers and guiding spirits of empiricism and the scientific method. To any claim, proposition or theory unsubstantiated by evidence, the automatic Enlightenment response was: 'Prove it!' That is, provide the evidence, show that what you allege is true, or otherwise suspend judgement.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the prestige which Newton's discoveries gave to the *method* whereby he arrived at them. Empiricism worked and was seen to work. It was verifiable; the experiments could be repeated time and again, always with the same result and revealing the same connection between cause and effect, the same immutable underlying 'laws' of nature in operation. In the well-known epigram of Alexander Pope, Newton's elevated status is clear:

Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night,
God said, *Let Newton be!* and All was Light.

(Dobree, 1959, p. 122)

Both the philosophical and practical advantages of Newtonianism and the scientific method were further and vividly brought out in the second half of the eighteenth century with startling advances in industrial technology. The *Encyclopédie* was explicitly inclusive of 'the arts', and in the eighteenth century these included technology and the mechanical arts. In his article 'Stocking-machine' in the *Encyclopédie*, lavishly illustrated in one of the supplements, Diderot showed how mechanisation ingeniously multiplied human efforts and thus facilitated human comfort and convenience. In Britain, improving on James Hargreaves's spinning-jenny (1764), Richard Arkwright with his water-frame (1768) and Samuel Crompton with his mule (1779) applied technology to the mass production of cloth by steam-driven machines. Such labour-saving devices, so manifestly advantageous, illustrated the triumph of scientific method and Enlightenment rationalism. Empiricism was thus central to the Enlightenment's desire to establish knowledge on firm foundations rather than blindly following authority, convention, tradition and prejudice. Where such foundations were lacking, where the speaker or writer could not satisfactorily respond to the challenge to 'prove it', it was clear that their claims should be met with a strong measure of scepticism.

Exercise 3

Try to formulate in roughly one sentence the summary point for the argument starting with the subheading 'Enlightenment, science and empiricism'.

Summary point: Enlightenment thinkers placed particular emphasis on empirical knowledge and what they described as scientific method: that is, knowledge verifiable by reference to experiment, experience or first-hand observation.

Empiricism was applied to every aspect of human thought and activity. The Scottish philosopher David Hume's approach to the issues of suicide and the immortality of the soul is suffused by a respect for the demands of empirical reasoning and the related question, 'Is such-and-such a factual claim probable in the light of common human experience?' Hume dismissed with evident relish all speculative reasoning not based on verifiable fact. By speculative reasoning he meant, above all, that based on religious revelation, private intuition, theological dogma and the authority of the churches. The explorer Mungo Park and his close associate, the scientist and botanist Joseph Banks (1743–1820), shared this concern with close observation as the basis of our knowledge of the world, though Park was a believing and practising Christian. The scientific method was happily applied in the eighteenth century by many believers and men of the cloth, who, unlike Hume, felt that science reinforced rather than undermined the reasonableness of religious belief. Cugoana's arguments against slavery were also based on appeals to observation and experience, inviting the reader to judge for himself. Landscape artists and theorists both amateur and professional, such as **William Gilpin** (1724–1804) and **John Constable** (1776–1837), paid greater attention to direct observation and sketching of their subject rather than simply the careful imitation of revered masterpieces of the past. This practice was not an eighteenth-century invention, but firsthand studies of the landscape assumed greater importance in relation to studio work as the century progressed. Seeing and thinking for yourself and drawing on the evidence of the five senses were central to the Enlightenment mindset.

Specialisation of knowledge was less common in the eighteenth century than it is today, and the boundaries of what we now call 'science' were defined relatively late in the nineteenth century. For the *philosophes* and Enlightenment men and women generally, an interest in botany or chemistry might sit happily alongside intellectual enquiry into politics, art, literature and economics. As well as being an explorer, Mungo Park, who had qualified as a surgeon, had a keen interest in natural history and in the system of the Swedish naturalist Carl von Linnaeus (1707–78) for the classification of plants. It was common to speculate on connections between science and other subjects such as human nature, religion and morality. There were many debates, for example, on the workings of the nervous system in relation to the question of how far we are responsible for our actions, or on the physical laws of the natural world in relation to the nature or indeed the existence of God.

The Royal Institution in London played a large part in making science a fashionable concern of the educated elite. In the Midlands the Unitarian minister, radical thinker, chemist and inventor of soda water Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) conducted experiments that spread knowledge of experimental science throughout society. A supporter of the French Revolution, he saw the potential of science to contribute to political and religious change. The French scientist Antoine Lavoisier (1743–94) set in motion a development known as the 'chemical revolution', which changed the way in which chemical elements

were classified, as well as recognising the key role of oxygen in chemical processes. Both the French Revolution and Napoleon's regime perpetuated the Enlightenment emphasis on science as a means of acquiring mastery over the natural world: intellectual power was harnessed in the service of the state. By affording access to the general laws governing the physical universe, science was the strong arm, as well as the foundation, of reason. As Romanticism gained ground in the wider culture, science was sometimes perceived as an antidote (or a salutary, sobering, cold shower) to the feverish ravings of feeling or the imagination. To Enlightenment thinkers, science was much more than a set of topics to be studied. It represented the unshakeable triumph of the empirical method, the crucial testing of hypotheses against evidence, that could be applicable to all aspects of human enquiry, including questions of morality and religion.

Exercise 4

Now read the AV Notes (click 'View document' below), focusing on the section on science, which will direct you to watch 'Advances in medicine' and attempt the exercise in the notes.

Click on 'View document' to [read the AV notes](#) and exercise for video 2 Advances in medicine'

Click on the blank screen below to start playing video 2 'Advances in medicine'

Video content is not available in this format.

[Advances in medicine](#)

4 Enlightenment, religion and morality

4.1 Constant human nature

Just as with other natural phenomena, Enlightenment thinkers came to the conclusion as a result of observation that human nature itself was a basic constant. In other words, it possessed common characteristics and was subject to universal, verifiable laws of cause and effect. As Hume put it:

Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature ...

(Hume, 1975, p. 83)

Hume was not consistent on this point, and his later writings suggest an essential difference between western and 'other' varieties of human nature. Nor did he view female nature in the same light as male. It was also widely accepted that human behaviour and the human condition were susceptible to environmental and educational influence. The desire for moral reform was supported by a belief in universally valid moral standards. The *philosophes* were confident that it was possible to identify virtue and vice, right and wrong, in a way that may seem alien to us today. If it was possible to discover universal laws that governed the physical workings of the universe, the same, they concluded, applied to the world of morality. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), Hume confidently declared:

The end of all moral speculation is to teach us our duty; and, by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget corresponding habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other.

(Hume, n.d., p. 409)

Summary point: Enlightenment thinkers believed that the basic principles underlying human nature were constant; they also believed that the human condition was susceptible of improvement. They felt it possible to formulate clear moral absolutes or universal standards.

This is one of the main sources of distinction between the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras: later thinkers would be less confident about identifying a uniform human nature or clear moral absolutes. Mungo Park followed Hume in demonstrating, on the basis of his own experience as an explorer, that Africans conformed to a universal human nature rather than being fundamentally different from Europeans, as was contended by many of those engaged in the highly lucrative slave trade. Park's exploration of 'the dark continent' achieved much in changing attitudes on this subject. In general, there was a pervasive faith in the potential to discover the laws governing human behaviour and morality. It is possible to see the Enlightenment mindset at work even in works such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which is open to several interpretations. This opera was influenced by a high art tradition of serious opera or *opera seria* in which characters overcome their flaws and achieve moral greatness. Commonly in tragedy the theme was the triumph of duty over love or passion. The chief character in *Don Giovanni* (Don

Giovanni himself) does not even attempt this exercise, and is finally punished in a way that suggests the existence of moral absolutes. The opera's alternative title is *The Rake Punished*.

4.2 Materialism

Increasingly, particularly in late Enlightenment texts, this confidence in our ability to discover and apply clear moral distinctions came into conflict with an alternative view of human nature and morality derived from philosophical materialism, which was particularly influential in France. To a materialist everything, from our nervous system and reflex actions to our innermost thoughts and most 'mystical' beliefs, was susceptible to examination by the physical sciences; our thoughts and actions were explicable in purely physical terms. If the universe was a kind of great machine in which everything was subject to unalterable laws, might not the same be true of human beings? Building on the foundations laid by ancient philosophers such as the Roman poet Lucretius (c.98–55 BCE) and bolstered by the Enlightenment's commitment to the physical sciences, many eighteenth-century thinkers, including Diderot, pursued the consequences of this philosophy. Materialism was based on the belief that everything we can know or experience has causes and explanations rooted in physical matter. Such ideas were seen as a threat to traditional religion with its belief in an immaterial or non-corporeal, spiritual soul able to survive the body after death, and also to the concept of free will and the capacity to choose between good and evil.

Materialism, then, had disturbing implications for Christianity and for morality conceived of as obedience to a set of divine injunctions. First, it seemed to leave little scope for God, except as a possible prime mover or great architect of the universe who, having set the universe in motion, thereafter sat back without intervening further, leaving it – and humanity – to operate like automata in accordance with the unalterable laws of nature. From this perspective divine providence, after its initial intervention, was redundant. Second, if everything is reducible to physical phenomena and processes, then physical sensations assume great importance in moral matters. Building on the well-established premise that the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are central to human happiness and well-being, eighteenth-century materialists rejected the fundamental Christian concept of original sin (humankind's innate depravity) and other guilt-inducing moral dictates in order to focus on human sensations and the relationship between physical and moral health. One consequence of this was a new legitimisation of hedonism, or the conscious pursuit of pleasure.

Summary point: in Enlightenment France philosophical materialism, the belief that everything (including the apparently spiritual) can be explained in terms of physical matter and the laws governing it, became increasingly influential. It encouraged in some thinkers a tendency to argue that all moral matters might be reduced to the maximising of physical pleasure.

The **Marquis de Sade** (1740–1814) twisted such ideas into perversity by rejecting as a moral criterion everything except that which conduces to the gratification of our physical desires and by defining human nature in terms of the 'natural' influences of physiology, environment and climate. This is an approach conducive to amorality rather than to moral guidelines. Sade's *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man* (1782) dramatises the encounter of such a credo with the priest's conventional but ultimately assailable Catholic beliefs. The dying man's self-seeking hedonism conflicts with the Enlightenment requirement for a clearly defined, socially controlled moral code.

Materialism was one of many threats to the status of religion. Enlightenment thinkers analysed and criticised religious beliefs in the same way as they subjected to rational scrutiny secular topics such as geological or economic theories. By refusing to treat religion as sacrosanct or the source of its own authority, they threw down a challenge to ecclesiastical institutions, especially in France, where there was a strong alliance of church and state, and the former was seen both as a support and as a beneficiary (for example, through tax exemptions) of an inherently despotic system of government. The perceived corruption and grip on privilege of the Catholic Church, as well as its role in state censorship and its overall hostility to Enlightenment ideas, provoked in the French *philosophes* much anti-religious and anti-clerical criticism as well as the kind of sparkling irony and provocative wit that characterised Voltaire's *Candide* or his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764). In *Candide*, James Boswell noted, 'Voltaire, I am afraid, meant only by wanton profaneness to obtain a sportive victory over religion, and to discredit our belief of a superintending Providence' (Boswell, 1951, p. 210). In 1762 the Archbishop of Paris similarly complained about both the Enlightenment message and its tone:

Disbelief has in our time adopted a light, pleasant, frivolous style, with the aim of diverting the imagination, seducing the mind, and corrupting the heart. It puts on an air of profundity and sublimity and professes to rise to the first principles of knowledge so as to throw off a yoke it considers shameful to mankind and to the Deity itself. Now it declaims with fury against religious zeal yet preaches toleration for all; now it offers a brew of seditious ideas with badinage, of pure moral advice with obscenities, of great truths with great errors, of faith with blasphemy.

(Barzun, 2000, p. 368)

The archbishop was right: the *philosophes* were implying that while the morality preached by Jesus was unexceptionable, educated people would be better off if they jettisoned the age-old lumber of theology, metaphysics, rituals, priests and monks. One of the alternatives frequently recommended to the enlightened was the natural, universal religion of deism, a pure and rational system of ethics uncluttered by dubious miracles, dubious science and dubious history. The authorities took action. In 1766 two young French nobles were sentenced to death for failing to remove their hats and singing ribald songs in the presence of a religious procession honouring the Virgin Mary. Sentence was confirmed by the Supreme Court in Paris, which noted that irreligion was rife and blamed Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*. One of the young men escaped, and obtained a commission in the Prussian army through Voltaire's intervention with Frederick the Great. The other, the Chevalier de la Barre, was put to death, his tongue excised and his body burned at the stake together with a copy of the *Philosophical Dictionary*.

Summary point: the French Enlightenment subjected religion and its institutions to rational, secular analysis and was often disrespectful, sceptical and subversive in its attitude to the Catholic Church.

Even Rousseau, a fervent though unorthodox believer, did not escape censure. Both the Catholic Church in France and the Calvinist Church in Geneva were outraged by his suggestion that people were naturally good and that an emotional communion with nature was as sound a basis for faith as the formal teachings of the Church. Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), in which he advanced these views in a section called the 'Profession of faith of a Savoyard vicar', was formally condemned by the authorities at Geneva and publicly burned together with his political tract *Du contrat social* (*Of the Social Contract*, 1762).

The Archbishop of Paris, the Sorbonne and the high court in Paris likewise condemned *Emile* to be burned. Rousseau fled to asylum in Prussian territory.

4.3 Responses to religion

Reasoned responses to religion could take many forms. It was rare for writers to profess outright atheism; even in those cases where we may suspect authors of holding this view, censorship laws made their public expression unlawful. These laws were particularly stringent in France. In many cases reasoned critique was applied to the practices of institutional religion, such as the corruption of the clergy or the rituals of worship, rather than to more fundamental matters of doctrine or faith. Wilberforce, a devout Christian, argued that Sunday might be spent more cheerfully than was customary in England, and Robert Owen's attacks on Scottish sectarianism also included complaints about the dour Calvinist sabbath. It was extremely common for those with specific church allegiances to adopt the rationalising approaches popularised in more secular contexts. Mungo Park's Scottish Nonconformity (Park was a 'Secessionist', a sect of Protestant Calvinism) was coloured by the deist argument from design, discussed below. In England the Protestantism of the relatively tolerant Anglican Church accommodated a wide range and variety of approach to matters of belief. In both France and Britain there was a wealth of parsons, priests and lay preachers engaged in studying all the topics of interest to the average *philosophe*. Gilbert White, a country parson, was a naturalist, author of the still popular *Natural History of Selborne* (1789). One of the most prominent figures of the British Enlightenment, Samuel Johnson (1709–84), was a devout Anglican. In our period, Christianity itself was often orientated towards Enlightenment and reform (Aston, 1990, pp. 81–99). In 1790, when the fiercely controversial reform of the French Church was introduced in revolutionary France, it had supporters as well as opponents among the clergy.

Natural religion was a form of religious belief founded on the observation of nature rather than on revelation or scriptural authority. Often associated with this approach was deism, a particular religious belief which holds that God designed and created the world, but so effectively that there would be no further need for his intervention. Deist views were expressed by those who questioned conventional Christianity and who believed in a universal rather than a sectarian God. They often used reason and argument together with their observation of nature: the existence of a benevolent, intelligent creator or Supreme Being was inferred from observation of the complex but well-ordered and indeed marvellous universe explored, revealed and explained by Newton. (This was called the 'argument from design'.) The notion of God as a necessary creator, first cause, supreme architect, or a kind of celestial clockmaker who devised and set the universe in motion, was well expressed by writers such as Voltaire. In 1774, at the age of 80 and moved by the spectacle of a magnificent sunrise, he prostrated himself on the ground, exclaiming: 'I believe! I believe in you! Powerful God, I believe!' Clambering to his feet, he added dryly: 'As for Monsieur the son and Madame his mother, that's a different story' (quoted in Gay, 1968, p. 122). While philosophers such as David Hume questioned the logic behind such professions of faith, others were keen to embrace a belief in God apparently grounded in empiricism. The Catholic Church in France tended to regard deism as located on the slippery slope leading to atheism, while sections of the Anglican Church tolerated and even encouraged deist sentiments as a support to religion. Many Anglicans cited natural religion or deism alongside arguments drawn from the Bible. Cugoana was among those who adopted this eclectic approach in his views on slavery, and Rousseau saw God in

nature as well as in the morality of the Gospels. William Gilpin, English parson and writer of travel guides, likewise saw God's presence in the beauty of the landscape while remaining attached to broad-church Anglicanism.

Summary point: deism, a reasoned form of belief in God based on the methods of natural religion – that is, observation of the natural world – often deployed the argument from design. This was the view that the intelligence and goodness of God, as designer of the world, could be inferred from the workings and beauties of nature. Deist arguments were used by those who embraced more traditional forms of worship, as well as by those who wished to challenge them.

Evangelical Christianity in Britain adopted the Enlightenment's concern with empirical investigation and applied it to its thinking on both the natural world and the Scriptures, albeit within the framework of particular religious beliefs, in order to produce a more reasoned form of worship better adapted to modern times. There were many attempts such as these to challenge forms of belief based on an unthinking acceptance of tradition and authority. The intellectual refinement of faith was prevalent. William Wilberforce, in his *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* (1797), subjected the state of contemporary religion to rational scrutiny and connected the decline of faith with increased industrialisation and mechanisation. His method of analysis drew on an enlightened secular approach in order to signal the need for a more intensely experienced form of faith. His personal commitment to religion continued to embrace a non-demonstrable belief in the afterlife. Enlightened rational scrutiny could assist in religious reform without destroying faith.

Setting aside these various shades of response to religious issues, one of the major developments of the Enlightenment was an increasingly secular approach to morality. It became more common for writers of all types of religious persuasion, as well as sceptics and non-believers, to discuss virtue and vice in terms that had little to do with religion or the spiritual and more to do with notions of individual or social well-being. Sade's sensualism rejected conventional Christian morality and social norms in order to take individual self-interest to excessive lengths.

Summary point: the Enlightenment's spirit of rational enquiry was deployed even by those who adhered to an intense spirituality. However, moral debates were increasingly decoupled from matters of religious belief and doctrine.

5 Enlightenment and the classics

The civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome formed both a common background and a major source of inspiration to Enlightenment thinkers and artists (see Figure 4). The dominant culture of the Enlightenment was rooted in the classics, and its art was consciously imitative and neoclassical. English literature of the first half of the century was known as 'Augustan' – that is, comparable to the classic works of the age of the Roman emperor Augustus (27 BCE–CE 14), notably Virgil and Horace and, from the late republican period, Cicero. Augustan literature was characterised by moderation, decorum and a sense of order. The Augustan poet would use classical allusion, authority and satire to convey a deeply reasoned wisdom. The verse of Alexander Pope was quintessentially Augustan in its compressed insights into mankind, expressed in controlled, balanced verse. In his *Imitations of Horace*, Pope paid tribute to his admired classical model.

Horace, he wrote,

Will, like a friend, familiarly convey
The truest notions in the easiest way.

(Quoted in Lentin, 1997, p. xxxvii)



Figure 4 Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Fussli), *The Artist Moved by the Grandeur of Antique Fragments* (right hand and left foot of the Colossus of Constantine), 1778–80, red chalk and sepia wash on paper, 42 x 35.5 cm, Kunsthhaus, Zurich. Photo: Lauros/Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library

From the grounding in Latin and Greek which formed the basis of their education, the wealthy and well connected of the eighteenth century were at home with the poetry, history and philosophy of the ancient world. In the words of Samuel Johnson, 'classical quotation is the *parole* [password] of literary men all over the world' (Boswell, 1951, vol.2, p. 386). When Johnson dined in company with the disreputable politician John Wilkes, neither thought it out of place to discuss a disputed passage in Horace. James Boswell, Johnson's companion and biographer, and son of a Scottish law lord, the Laird of Auchinleck, recalled how in his youth he had associated well-known passages from classical verse with the natural, indeed 'romantic' beauties of the estate:

The family seat was rich in natural romantic beauties of rock, wood, and water; and ... in my 'morn of life' I had appropriated the finest descriptions in the ancient Classics, to certain scenes there, which were thus associated in my mind.

(Boswell, 1951, vol.2, p. 131)

Across Europe the social elite studied antique statuary, either by viewing originals or copies close to home or by going on the 'Grand Tour' to Italy, to view original sculptures and buildings in Rome itself. To participate in such a tour, to be well versed in the ancient languages and to commission buildings and paintings in the antique style – a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, a mansion by Robert Adam – signalled membership of a class that felt itself to represent the very best of western civilisation and that surrounded itself with classical statuary or neoclassical artefacts as emblems of wealth, status and power (see Figure 5).

Men and women of the Enlightenment related to, empathised and identified with the ancient world, more particularly with the world of classical Rome, believing that eighteenth-century Europe had achieved a similar peak of cultural excellence. In the words of Edward Gibbon (1737–94 – see Figure 6), author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), contemporary Europe was 'one great republic, whose various inhabitants have attained almost the same level of politeness and cultivation' (Gibbon, 1954, p. 107). By contrast, eighteenth-century Europe tended to reject as 'barbarous' or 'Gothic' the Middle Ages, which it called the Dark Ages, the entire millennium from the fall of Rome in the fifth century CE to the Renaissance in the fifteenth.

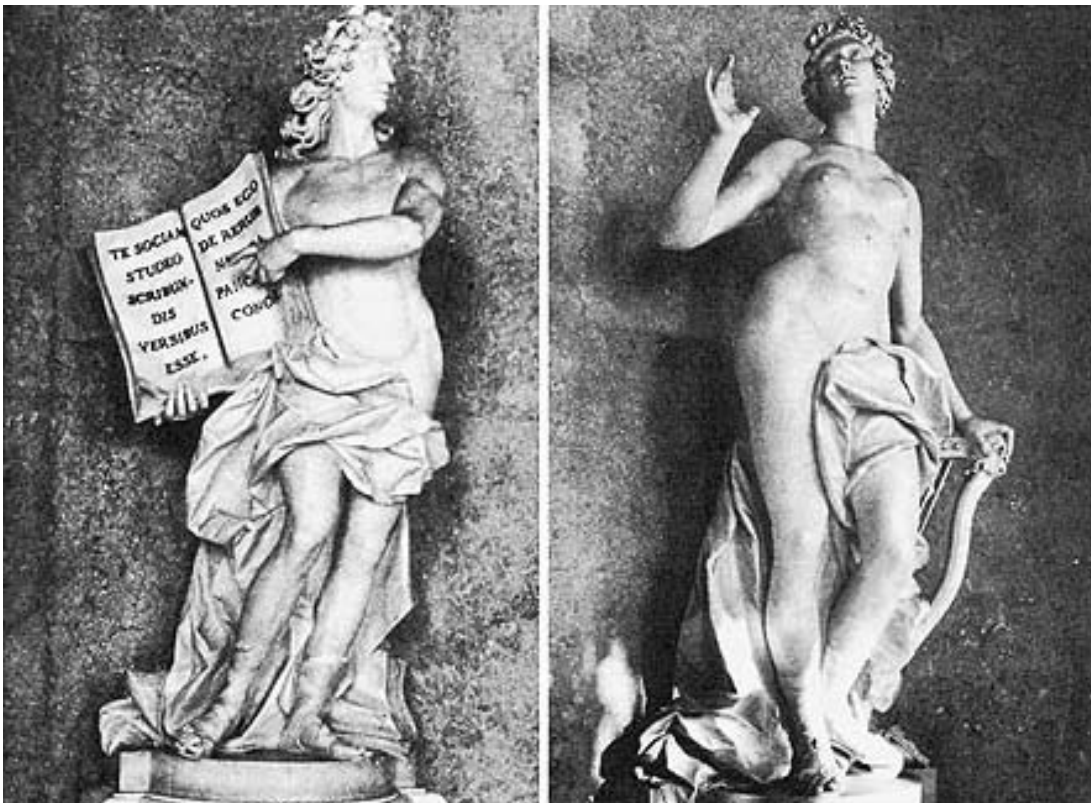


Figure 5 F.G. Adam, marble statues of Apollo and Venus, 1740, Frederick the Great's palace, Sans-Souci. Photo: Paul Kafno



Figure 6 Lady Diana Beauclerk, caricature of Edward Gibbon, c.1770, pen drawing, British Museum, London. Photo: by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Contrasting the perceived uncongeniality of the Middle Ages with the perfection of republican and imperial Rome, Gibbon looked back as the inspiration for his *Decline and Fall* to the moment in his Grand Tour when he sat musing in the ruins of the Forum at Rome, 'whilst the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter' (quoted in Lentin and Norman, 1998, p. viii). The contrast between the noble ruins of pagan antiquity and the 'barefooted friars' suggested a tension between classical values and the Christian: Gibbon blamed the forces of 'barbarism and religion' for their contribution to the fall of the Roman empire (Lentin and Norman, p. 1074).

The German philosopher Kant summed up the Enlightenment view of the Dark Ages as 'an incomprehensible aberration of the human mind' (quoted in Anderson, 1987, p. 415). In 1784, defining Enlightenment as 'man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity', Kant argued that people should cease to rely unthinkingly on authority and on received wisdom; they should have the courage to think for themselves. 'The motto of enlightenment', he declared, 'is therefore *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own understanding' (Eliot and Whitlock, 1992, p. 305). The motto was taken from Horace.

The classics, then, provided for Enlightenment thinkers not just a standard of artistic perfection for emulation but also an independent set of criteria against which to measure, compare and contrast the past and contemporary world, and a spur to thought and action.

To the particular delight of the anti-clerical *philosophes*, the classics suggested a secular alternative to Christian modes of thought and expression. In their constant assaults on conventional religion, they found in the ancient philosophies of Stoicism and Epicureanism, or an eclectic mix of both, an attraction and a pedigree that predated Christianity and suggested rational or at least dignified alternatives for people to live by – and indeed to die by. In the deaths of Socrates and Seneca, the classics offered a noble tradition of suicide, a mortal sin in the eyes of the Church. The dying Hume, claimed with apparent equanimity and very much in the spirit of the Romans that he had neither fear of death nor belief in a future life. The classics were also used to legitimise modern ideas on society and culture in a way that suggested Enlightenment ideas had universal force and relevance, being rooted in the oldest and greatest of civilisations.

Summary point: for Enlightenment artists and thinkers, classical antiquity provided a standard of greatness, a symbol of power and a secular legitimisation of their own forward thinking.

Exercise 5

Turn now to your AV Notes (click on 'View document' below), which will direct you to watch section 3, 'The classics'. When you have worked through this section of the video and attempted the exercise in the notes, return to this course.

Click on ['View document'](#) to read the notes and exercise for video 3

Click on the blank screen below to start playing video 3 'The classics'

Video content is not available in this format.

[The classics](#)

6 The Enlightenment on art, genius and the sublime

Enlightenment ideas on art and the creative process were deeply influenced by the contemporary veneration for reason, empiricism and the classics. The business of the artist was conceived of as the imitation of nature, and as far as high art was concerned, this process of imitation should be informed by an intelligent grasp of the processes used to produce classical art. The ancients and their art were seen as models in the judicious selection of the most beautiful elements observed in nature, creating forms of ideal or 'beautiful' nature that were derived from a distillation of the very best and a filtering out of physical flaws. The leading art critic Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) held up Greek statuary for imitation as the embodiment of perfection. Transmitted to the eighteenth century via a robust Renaissance artistic tradition based on the antique, Enlightenment Neoclassicism in its broadest sense attempted not only direct borrowings from the antique (the imitation of architectural motifs, the use of classical drapes to clothe figures, idealised treatment of the human figure based on antique sculpture, reference to sculptural poses), but also an emulation of the order, unity, proportion and harmony felt to underpin all classical art. The principles of classical composition were based on the notion of a clear focus on a central motif (a hero, martyr or saint); grand, unifying (as opposed to sparkling, dappled or disjointed) effects of light and shade that wouldn't distract the eye to the detriment of mental focus on an elevating subject; noble simplicity, balance and symmetry (see Figure 7). You will find in the art of **Jacques-Louis David** (1748–1825) the expression of a particularly pure form of classical composition.



Figure 7 Nicolas Poussin, *The Holy Family in Egypt*, 1655–7, 105 x 145.5 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. The principles of classical composition

demonstrated in this painting – balance, symmetry, broad, unified light effects and a prominent, hierarchical positioning of the main figures–influenced generations of eighteenth-century painters. Poussin was greatly influenced by antique friezes and statuary

As the century progressed, the dangers of servile imitation, or a formulaic approach to art, were increasingly recognised as the claims for more ‘natural’ art were asserted. A significant body of opinion developed that was critical of artists who simply imitated the art of the past in a way that degenerated into artifice and mannerism. In the 1760s Diderot, who also wrote as an art critic, was among those who insisted that artists should pay more respect to nature. Study of idealised antique statuary and the principles of anatomy and proportion that had informed it remained important to artists, but it was stressed increasingly that respect for these must not exclude or diminish first-hand observation of the human body. Life drawing classes at the academies of art allowed male artists to study the nude, but the human models were normally posed in highly artificial ways that complied with the conventions of antique sculpture; their poses and the positions of their limbs were fixed in the drawing studio by a complex arrangement of ropes, pulleys and blocks (see Figure 8). Theorists called increasingly for less artificial poses and methods of observation.



Figure 8 Michel-Ange Houasse, *The Drawing Academy*, c.1725, 61 x 72.5 cm, oil on canvas, Royal Palace, Madrid. Photo: © Patrimonio Nacional

This growing quest for the ‘natural’ extended to changing views on the status of different genres or subjects in art. While high art, inspired by classical or religious subjects, retained its position at the top of the hierarchies perpetuated by the academies of Europe, there was a growing appreciation of the lower genres of landscape, still life and scenes of everyday life, which required more direct observation of a more natural reality. In landscape art, as you will see, the idealised classical landscapes of the seventeenth-century French artist Claude Lorrain (1600–82) remained extremely influential. But there

was also an increasing tendency to place more emphasis on directly observed sketches of the landscape that, while still beautifying nature, allowed for imitation of a greater variety of natural effects. Enlightenment artists and critics were emboldened to demand greater naturalism or realism in art, in both style and subject matter, as a result of the popularity of Dutch and Flemish paintings, which had generated a northern tradition increasingly seen as a real alternative to the classical. In England William Gilpin and other artists and writers interested in what they called the 'picturesque' advocated travel as a means of viewing real landscapes and directly observed sketches as part of the process of producing views 'fit for a picture'. The quest for greater naturalism was seen in France as an antidote to the early eighteenth-century excesses of the Rococo, a specific adaptation or 'debasement' of the grand classical style characterised by serpentine curves and asymmetric forms applied mainly to portraiture and to erotic and playful mythological subjects (see Figure 9). In the second half of the eighteenth century, a greater respect for nature was seen as a moral solution to the luxury and corruption of the Rococo's aristocratic patrons.



Figure 9 François Boucher, *The Triumph of Venus*, 1740, oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm, National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm. Photo: National Museum of Fine Arts. Boucher's frivolous and erotic Rococo style and treatment of mythological subjects exerted a large influence on mid-eighteenth-century taste. Associated with aristocratic decadence, they led to calls later in the century for art that was both more natural and more moral

Given the emphasis on imitation, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Enlightenment concept of the imagination was essentially that of producing new variations on old themes. The imagination was held to combine impressions observed in nature and previous art, but was generally not understood or required to include any great flights of

fancy. The pleasure of art lay in the recognition of the familiar reprocessed in ways adapted to modern times. While the *Encyclopédie* article on 'Genius', written by Jean Francois de Saint-Lambert, defined genius as consisting of extraordinary powers of mind, intuition and inspiration transcending mere intelligence, most Enlightenment commentators on aesthetic matters saw such qualities as appropriate to a specific stage of the artistic process (the initial moment of inspiration, the preliminary sketch) rather than as qualities that should dominate or overwhelm. Genius was a quality of mind to be welcomed, but the creative process must also involve reflection, study and observation. Indeed, many Enlightenment thinkers shared the conviction that good art was largely, though not exclusively, the product of compliance with well-established rules derived from the classics and empirical reason. As Voltaire observed in 1753, 'I value poetry only insofar as it is the ornament of reason' (quoted in Furst, 1969, p. 19). Voltaire's aesthetics, like those of most French writers of the eighteenth century, were based on the neoclassical canons of literature laid down in the reign of Louis XIV by such critics as Nicolas Boileau in his *Art of Poetry* (1674). So while Voltaire was a pioneer in introducing Shakespeare to the European public, he did so with profound reservations and, as it were, holding his nose, arguing that Shakespeare's plays included 'gold nuggets in a dung-heap'. He presented Shakespeare as a unique genius who succeeded despite such lamentable violations of the neoclassical rules as mixing comic and tragic elements in the same play. Voltaire was in good company in defending the accepted literary canons and explaining 'genius' as the exception that proved the rule. Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), President of the Royal Academy in London, adopted the same view in relation to art:

Could we teach taste or genius by rules, they would no longer be taste and genius. But though there neither are, nor can be, any precise invariable rules for the exercise, or the acquisition, of these great qualities, yet we may truly say that they always operate in proportion to our attention in observing the works of nature, to our skill in selecting, and to our care in digesting, methodising, and comparing our observations. There are many beauties in our art, that seem, at first, to lie without [outside] the reach of precept, and yet may easily be reduced to practical principles.

(Reynolds, 1975, p. 44)

The artist, in other words, should not let his imagination run away with him. Hume, too, warned of this danger:

The *imagination* of man is naturally sublime, delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary, and running without control into the most distant parts of space and time in order to avoid the objects which custom has rendered too familiar to it.

(Quoted in Hampson, 1968, p. 158)

The deeper irony for today's reader is that it was precisely this unconstrained escapism into long ago and far away, the 'remote and extraordinary', that was to captivate and characterise the Romantics.

Summary point: Enlightenment ideas on art and the artist were dominated by reason, moderation, classicism and control. However, there was recognition of the elusive quality of original 'genius'.

If most aesthetic ideas of the Enlightenment emphasised reason and experience, and classified 'genius' as something outside the rules, there was one further concept

mentioned by Hume, 'the sublime', that seemed to strain Enlightenment rationality to its limits. Theorised by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, a sublime aesthetic experience was one that inspired awe and terror in the spectator or reader. The sublime was something literally overwhelming, either because of its enormity (a high mountain, a deep chasm, a blinding light), its infinity (the spiritual or timeless) or its obscurity (a cloud-capped mountain, a floating mist, night, intense darkness) – all, significantly, the opposite of the precise, measured, penetrating 'light' of the Enlightenment. When faced with the sublime, the viewer, listener or reader felt a kind of paralysis of the will and of the powers of understanding and imagination. At the same time, as an *aesthetic* experience (grounded in art rather than reality) the sublime allowed for the thrill of danger without its real consequences. Immensely popular in this context across Europe were the 'works' of Ossian, ostensibly a poetic cycle by a Gaelic bard of the third century CE, but in fact the invention of James MacPherson (1736–96), who published his prose 'translations' in 1760. Napoleon was among the many devotees of Ossian, as much moved by the tales of legendary heroes in a wild, rugged and primitive northern setting as by Homer's more familiar Greeks and Trojans. This kind of exalted experience was increasingly sought in art and by the late Enlightenment was a dominant aesthetic mode:

It is night. I am alone, forlorn on the hill of storms. The wind is heard in the mountain. The torrent pours down the rock. No hut receives me from the rain, forlorn on the hill of winds. Rise o moon from behind the clouds. Stars of the night, arise!

(MacPherson, Colma's lament from Ossian, quoted in Barzun, 2000, p. 409)

In Mozart's *Don Giovanni* the sublime emerges in the infernal forces that swallow the main character at the end of the opera, and perhaps in the sublime courage of the man who defies them. The image of Prometheus, the demi-god punished for his defiance of the king of the gods, began to haunt the poetic imagination when **Goethe** (1749–1832) devoted to it a dramatic fragment and ode (1773). For the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it was the possession of a non-material soul that allowed people to seize the infinity of the sublime. This sensation of phenomena straining or exceeding the limits of human understanding was later to form the basis of a fully-fledged Romantic aesthetic.

Summary point: in the Enlightenment the theorisation and popularisation of the sublime began to undermine the eighteenth century's otherwise clear emphasis on the knowable, the rational and controllable.

7 The Enlightenment and nature

The sublime was potentially subversive of the Enlightenment mindset, which focused mainly on the power of human intelligence to grasp and explain the natural world, and indeed to discover natural causes of phenomena previously considered supernatural. There were, for example, frequent attempts to demystify the 'miracles' narrated in the Bible, since the violation of the laws of nature which a miracle implied was a physical impossibility and a contradiction in terms. The Marquis de Sade was appealing to an established Enlightenment mentality when he declared that there was no need to look beyond the physical world of nature (including human physiological needs), to the spiritual, in order to explain human behaviour. Hume had already popularised the notion that human beings can be understood purely as creations of nature. Enlightenment science and technology sought to open up to scrutiny and harness the power of all aspects of the natural world, while landscape painters and garden designers attempted to prune, beautify and frame nature in ways that emphasised the human capacity to control it. Nature was regarded as an object of investigation rather than a force or attraction in its own right.

When Samuel Johnson visited Scotland with his companion and biographer James Boswell in 1773, he recorded his impressions in *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*.

Exercise 6

Read the following passage on the Highland mountains from Johnson's *Journey*. How would you describe his attitude towards mountainous regions? In answering this question, it will be helpful to identify key words that betray the emotional colour of Johnson's response.

Of the hills many may be called, with Homer's Ida, *abundant in springs*, but few can deserve the epithet which he bestows upon Pelion, by *waving their leaves*. They exhibit very little variety, being almost wholly covered with dark heath, and even that seems to be checked in its growth. What is not heath is nakedness, a little diversified by now and then a stream rushing down the steep. An eye accustomed to flowery pastures and waving harvests, is astonished and repelled by this wide extent of hopeless sterility. The appearance is that of matter incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed by Nature from her care, and disinherited of her favours, left in its original elemental state, or quickened only with one sullen power of useless vegetation.

It will very readily occur, that this uniformity of barrenness can afford very little amusement to the traveller; that it is easy to sit at home and conceive rocks, and heath, and waterfalls; and that these journeys are useless labours, which neither impregnate the imagination, nor enlarge the understanding. It is true, that of far the greater part of things, we must content ourselves with such knowledge as description may exhibit, or analogy supply; but it is true, likewise, that these ideas are always incomplete, and that, at least, till we have compared them with realities, we do not know them to be just. As we see more, we become possessed of

more certainties, and consequently gain more principles of reasoning, and found a wider basis of analogy.

Regions mountainous and wild, thinly inhabited, and little cultivated, make a great part of the earth, and he that has never seen them, must live unacquainted with much of the face of nature, and with one of the great scenes of human existence.

(Greene, 1986, pp. 611–12)

'Hopeless sterility', 'repelled', 'disinherited', 'uniformity of barrenness': these terms betray Johnson's personal aversion to mountains, particularly those stripped bare of vegetation. Although he sees them as among the 'great scenes of human existence' (no doubt because of their significance and scale, which as dutiful empirical reasoners we need to see and confirm for ourselves), they emerge as natural features to be shunned by those seeking 'amusement' (objects of interest).

Let's pause a moment to consider what Johnson is saying and his mode of delivery, his style. Johnson is the archetypal voice of the Enlightenment. Note the prose: poised, balanced, eloquent, dignified, 'Augustan' indeed, combining classical learning (the italicised quotations from Homer) with close observation, and drawing broad, balanced conclusions. The mountains themselves, he says, are of inherently little interest to the thinking man, and from the aesthetic point of view the Scottish mountains, far from overwhelming by their 'sublimity', are particularly unattractive, arid and monotonous. The Highlands, not being amenable to agriculture, also lack 'usefulness'. Johnson's is the view of the city dweller, conscious of the interdependence of productive labour and civilised society (the word 'civilised' derives from 'city').

Summary point: to the enlightened, wild nature was often a source of discomfort rather than a stimulus to the imagination.

Wild nature, whether in the Highlands or the Alps (the passage of which was considered an unpleasant obstacle on the Grand Tour to Italy), was to be shunned or brought under control. (Napoleon, who crossed the Alps several times on his early campaigns, was as emperor to build mountain passes to facilitate communication with the Italian parts of his 'French empire'.) The late eighteenth-century fashion for picturesque landscape art and sketching discussed by William Gilpin in his *Observations on ... the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland* (1786) and **Uvedale Price's** (1747–1829) *Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1794) recommended a judicious selection and arrangement of landscape motifs so that the viewer's eye would be led into the middle distance of a picture and encounter a painted scene in an ordered way. Mountains were often safely relegated to the background. Once again, the emphasis was on control of nature and on the pre-eminence of the *human* perspective or viewpoint. In other respects, however, the Enlightenment placed nature in the foreground. In the last section we saw how nature or naturalism became increasingly important to artists. In the same way, nature became increasingly recognised as a guide or force in moral matters. Once thinkers were removed from contemplation of its raw or real state (in, for example, the form of wild landscapes), they elevated its virtues and often overlooked its defects. The most renowned advocate of natural simplicity was Rousseau, who in his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750) and his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), as well as in *Emile* (1762), promoted the idea of natural simplicity and the primitive as a corrective to corrupting wealth and sophistication. ('Discourses' were, like 'Enquiries' and

'Dialogues', an established type of Enlightenment rational enquiry.) Although Rousseau did not believe that human society should revert to a crude primitive state, he did attempt to promote the virtues of a simpler life close to nature, and used the idea of the 'primitive' to highlight the deficiencies of contemporary society and point the way to reform. Finding much contemporary culture morally corrupt, he advocated a regenerated culture very different from that of the Parisian *salons* frequented by the *philosophes* (see [Figure 3](#)). For most Enlightenment thinkers sociability was central to their mission to share ideas, extend knowledge and engage in debate. Rousseau was initially a part of these enlightened social circles, sharing a common background in *salon*, coffee house, club, academy or learned society, where conversation and ideas flowed freely. Later, however, and partly as the result of arguments born of his own sense of alienation, he distanced himself and began to feel that truth was more likely to emerge from solitary reflection or imaginative reverie, and from the country rather than the city. In his novels (and also in an opera which he composed called *Le Devin du village* – *The Village Soothsayer*) he highlighted the virtues of simple people in communion with nature and their own hearts.

If the interest in nature expressed by most Enlightenment thinkers was less intense than Rousseau's, it is nevertheless true that all of them used the word 'nature' in a polemical sense, to highlight by contrasting with nature whatever they saw as unjust, unnatural and harmful in their own society and culture. Thus there was frequent appeal, in the *Encyclopédie* and elsewhere, to 'natural law', 'natural rights' and 'natural equality'. In many of these pronouncements use of the term 'nature' was highly questionable in that it was based on assumptions about how the world and its inhabitants might have been before the rot had set in, and before the establishment of specific social, moral and political structures. In moral, social and political matters, 'nature' represented an ideal state of affairs towards which we should strive.

Summary point: Enlightenment thinkers regarded nature (in the sense of the physical, observable world) as an object of study and wild nature as a force to be controlled. However, in many theoretical contexts (for example, aesthetic and moral matters) they often saw it as an authoritative guide or ideal, and deferred to it in a polemical, reformist spirit intended to highlight contemporary injustices and errors.

8 The forces of change: towards Romanticism

8.1 The forces of change: towards Romanticism

The relationship between the Enlightenment and the movement known as Romanticism, which dominated early nineteenth-century culture, is the subject of intense debate among scholars. There is no single correct way of defining this relationship, and one of the main challenges you will face in this course is in forming your own conclusions on the subject. It is possible, for example, to see the French Revolution as a cataclysmic event that tumbled the old order and ruptured faith in the Enlightenment and its reformist ambitions, thus stimulating the intense inwardness and doubt symptomatic of much Romantic thought. (This dimension of the Revolution is explored further below.) Equally, the growth in our period of a new class benefiting from the profits of industry and agrarian reform is often seen as a transforming influence in the wider culture. Freed from the conventional allegiances of the hereditary noble and genteel sections of society to the classical and the decorous, this emergent capitalist elite ('new money') expressed different priorities in art, literature and music as it attempted to assert its new status and identity. After the Revolution, these priorities included a new fear of the great mass of the population untouched by the Enlightenment, and a search for ways of controlling it. The reforms to factory conditions proposed by Robert Owen, for example, might be seen as a combination of enlightened humanitarianism and social control.

It can also be argued, however, that the seeds of Romanticism were sown by the Enlightenment itself. It was, after all, the Enlightenment that stimulated vigorous discussion and criticism of the status quo as part of an impulse towards the creation of a more modern culture. Certainly, the quest for rebellion and modernity intensified in the Romantic era. In the following section we'll be looking at some of the developments of the eighteenth century that are now often called 'pre-Romantic'. It is unwise to apply hindsight in such a way as to suggest that certain cultural developments took place in anticipation of others. Most large-scale cultural changes involve a complex web of factors. Nevertheless, Romanticism can be seen to have had gradual as well as more sudden causes, some of which, particularly the growing status of emotion and more personal responses to the human and natural worlds, we outline briefly below. We will then examine other agents of change.

8.2 The increasing status of feeling

Although the Enlightenment advocated the rigorous use of reason as the main means of achieving progress, some of its major thinkers also recognised the role of feeling or emotion, particularly in moral matters. Chief among these was Rousseau. He felt that 'inner sentiment' played an important part in matters of conscience and of religious faith, as well as in human relations. By 'sentiment' he meant everything embracing intuition (a word rarely used in the eighteenth century) and emotion *except* extreme emotion, which was normally referred to as 'passion'. As his career developed, Rousseau became

obsessive about sentiment. He had begun, like the rest of the *philosophes*, as a model rationalist, contributing articles on music to the *Encyclopédie* and writing works such as *Emile* that focused on a reasoned analysis of society's defects and proposed rational solutions. As a result of various quarrels, temperamental difficulties and growing paranoia, he increasingly saw himself as the enemy of other Enlightenment thinkers, whose excessive reliance on reason alone had, he believed, led them astray. If only they listened to their heart and conscience as much as to their reason, he believed, they would see things his way. In his best-selling *La Nouvelle Heloise* (1761) he wrote of the infallible promptings of individual conscience: 'Whatever I feel to be right, is right. Whatever I feel to be wrong, is wrong' (Hampson, 1968, p. 195).

To Hume, Rousseau's 'sensibility' (propensity for feeling) impeded rather than assisted his common sense. It threatened the processes of sound, empirical reasoning in the formulation of his views on religion and morality, and it seemed inappropriate to use sentiment as a means of establishing facts. Rousseau advocated a natural religion based on 'feeling' God's power and goodness through the contemplation of nature, in addition to deploying some of the more conventional arguments of rational deism (see [Figure 10](#)).

Rousseau's emphasis on sentiment led, in his later career, to a period of intense introspection explored through his autobiographical *Confessions* (which he read informally to friends in 1771), *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (on which he worked between 1776 and 1778, the year of his death) and *Rousseau, Judge of Jean Jacques* (completed in 1776), all of which were published posthumously. In these works he attempted to justify himself to those with whom he had quarrelled, to set the record straight, as he saw it. In the *Reveries* he described solitary walks in which he meditated on nature, and experienced by the lapping water of a lakeshore the delicious sensation of pure existence, while pouring scorn on his enemies, the *philosophes*, whom he increasingly classified as dogmatists. He indulged to an unprecedented degree in self-absorption, in an avowed conviction of and a delight in the consciousness of his own uniqueness, in posing and in answering the question: 'what am I myself?' (Furst, 1979, p. 57). In the *Confessions* too he begins with the same fascination with self:

I am undertaking a work which is wholly without precedent ... I wish to show my fellow-men a man in all his natural truth, and I myself will be that man. Myself alone. I feel my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those whom I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any other men who exist. If I am no better than they, at least I am different.

(Rousseau, 1847, p. 25; trans. Lentin)

The *Confessions* are written in a way that suggests openness and sincerity with what appears to be a ruthless and unforgiving exposure of his own faults, disappointments in love and sexual obsessions. In fact, they construct very carefully the persona with which he wishes to be identified: ardent but just. In contrast with the mainstream Enlightenment (say, with Johnson's reflections, implicitly based on a view of man as a social creature, a thinking member of rational society), Rousseau's prime concern is with *himself* as an individual and the uniqueness of his identity in a society with which he finds himself at odds.



Figure 10 Anonymous, *Rousseau 'Contemplating the Wild Beauties of Switzerland'*, 1797, engraving (frontispiece to R.B. Mowat, *The Age of Reason*, 1934, London, Harrap). The Romantics were to draw inspiration from Rousseau's closeness to nature, including wild mountainous scenes

Rousseau was not the first writer to engage in deep self-reflection or to be inspired by strong feeling. However, the nature and timing of Rousseau's writings had a profound impact on an eighteenth-century readership beginning to tire of pure reason and eager to explore aspects of their own identities. A conscious tinge of emotionalism counteracted Augustan common sense and the noonday clarity of the *Encyclopédie*. Poems such as Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742) and Thomas Gray's *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard* (1742–51) set a fashion for melancholic verse set in 'gothic' surroundings, typically a moonlit graveyard. Such verse foregrounded the emotion of the narrator's voice as he reflected on the inevitability of death, allowing his imagination freer range by relating to the evocative environment, the poet communing with himself and his own thoughts. Night settings were to become an important source of inspiration for Romantic writers, musicians and artists. In England the best-selling novels of Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–8), told deeply emotional tales, detailing the subjective reactions of innocent women deceived by rakes, and were

very influential for later Enlightenment writers such as Diderot. For these writers the aim was to stir the readers' emotions to the core, to the point of making them weep. From the 1760s onwards there was throughout Europe a cult of intense sensibility inspired in great part by figures such as Richardson and Rousseau. Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise*, which ran to 70 editions in France by 1789, told the story of two lovers torn between their love and duty to a third member of a love triangle. Translated into many languages, the novel inspired writers well into the nineteenth century.

Summary point: in the second half of the eighteenth century, a growing number of writers, artists and thinkers, many inspired by Rousseau, became preoccupied with the expression of emotions. Self-absorption and a concern with one's unique identity became more central.

This was paralleled in the emotionalism of the *Olney Hymns*, in which the Evangelicals Newton and Cowper sought to move their congregation with a sense that open-hearted receptivity to Christ's sacrifice and redeeming love could purge and revolutionise their own lives. The purpose and indeed the effect of the Evangelical mission within the Anglican Church was literally to move and stir the suppliant: to induce tears, fainting, speaking in tongues, profound emotional disturbance and spiritual regeneration. Religious 'enthusiasm' – the conviction of direct personal communion with God, a personal zeal for Christ, empathy with his sacrifice on the cross (a quality discouraged by traditional Anglicans and deplored by Dr Johnson as akin to fanaticism) – was the motive force of Evangelicalism. The rapid growth in our period of Methodism, originally a variant of, and then an alternative to, Anglicanism, also intensified emotional worship. Of John Wesley (1703–91), the founder of Methodism, it has been said: 'No single eighteenth-century figure influenced so many minds' (Dorn, 1940, p. 241). His preaching began in the 1730s, and therefore constituted one of the earlier stimuli to the cult of feeling. Wesley had experienced, preached and encouraged the soul-shaking emotionalism associated with conversion, in reaction to the worldly and tepid decorum approved by the mainstream Anglican Church. There were many manifestations of such emotionalism outside the context of religion. Sentimental (in the sense of 'full of sentiment') plays became popular at the theatre, and weeping in the galleries was taken as a sign of an audience's healthy moral conscience. This new emphasis on feeling in art and literature (see [Figure 11](#)) may have been, in part, a result of the increasing secularisation of the life of many of the privileged and educated; emotional fulfilment from art and literature was perhaps particularly important to those who felt that religion no longer answered their needs.



Figure 11 Etienne Aubry, *Paternal Love*, 1775, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 101.5 cm, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library. Aubry's painting exemplifies the cult of feeling that swept through European culture from the 1760s onwards. Sentiment was harnessed as a didactic, moral force

As an art critic, Diderot was among those who encouraged artists to paint emotive, moral anecdotes calculated to make the virtuous shed tears. Like many others, he argued that all good people would weep at the same misfortunes and would draw universal lessons from highly personal responses. This unprecedented emphasis on emotion drew greater attention to the personal responses of the individual, one of the central concerns of an emergent Romanticism.

In Germany from the 1770s there was a similar shift towards emotion in the form of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, normally translated as 'storm and stress'. The 'stress' was a form of reaching or striving forward that embraced a creative rebellion against convention in the cause of freedom, whether artistic, emotional or even political. Friedrich Schiller's *The Robbers* (1781) is a play about idealistic, self-assertive young anarchists who emulate Robin Hood. Their leader, the 'hero', Karl Moor, takes revenge on a hateful hide-bound society by committing a series of atrocious murders. He denounces authority in heady language:

The law has never yet formed a great man. It is freedom that has bred colossuses ... Put me in charge of a band of men like me, and I will make of Germany a republic beside which Rome and Sparta will seem like nunneries.

(Sorel, 1912, p. 162; trans. Lentin)

The unprecedented appeal of 'storm and stress' is shown by the reception of *The Robbers* on the opening night, which, as the commentator observed, marked a crucial literary and psychological threshold:

The theatre was like a lunatic asylum, with rolling eyes, clenched fists, hoarse uproar among the audience. Strangers fell sobbing into each other's arms, women tottered, half-fainting, to the door. It was a universal disruption into chaos, out of whose mists a new creation is emerging.

(Hampson, 1968, pp. 201–2)

The movement also emphasised the eccentricities of individual character, as opposed to the Enlightenment's focus on a universal human nature. The outlook projected by *Sturm und Drang* was that of the alienated outsider, the socially excluded, the outlaw. Alienation, self-expression and the sublime were also prominent in an early novel by Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). This novel, one of the most popular of the late eighteenth century, was close in its plot and tone to Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise*, but pushed the despair of impossible love to even more tragic extremes (see [Figure 12](#)). Life followed art when young men imitated Werther not only in the clothes they wore, but even to the point of committing suicide. Among the thousands of adolescent readers of *Werther* harbouring dark thoughts was a lonely 16-year-old officer cadet from Corsica training at the royal military academy at Paris, Napoleon Bonaparte.



Figure 12 Thomas Rowlandson, *The Triumph of Sentiment (Butcher Weeping over Werther)*, 1787, Goethe Museum, Düsseldorf

Rousseau's new emphasis on sensibility or feeling stimulated an interest in forces that posed a threat to the centrality of Enlightenment reason. Equally, his view of nature as a site of meditation and spiritual contemplation challenged the pre-eminence of nature as something to be categorised, controlled and exploited. Nothing could be further from the

Augustan common sense and sociability of Johnson, a city dweller addressing other city dwellers in his observations on the Highlands, than the introspective, fanciful and self-indulgent reflections typical of Rousseau's 'sensibility'. Yet for the generations that grew up on Rousseau, nothing was more attractive:

Emerging from a long and happy reverie, seeing myself surrounded by greenery, flowers and birds, and letting my eyes wander over the picturesque far-off shores which enclosed a vast stretch of crystalline water, I fused my imaginings with these charming sights, and finding myself in the end gradually brought back to myself and my surroundings, I could not draw a line between fiction and reality; so much did everything conspire equally to make me love the contemplative and solitary life I led in that beautiful place.

(Reveries of the Solitary Walker, 'Fifth Walk', 1782, in Rousseau, 1979, pp. 90–1)

For Rousseau nature was a part of, rather than separate from, his own thoughts, feelings and imaginings. This attitude, together with his emphasis on personal feeling, exerted a powerful influence on the Romantics.

8.3 Enlightenment, humanity and revolution

8.3.1 Humanity

We have seen from Diderot's article 'Encyclopedia' that the *philosophes* were convinced that their mission was for the benefit of their fellow human beings. For all of them, concern for humanity was the mainspring of their ideas and activities. The article on 'Fanaticism' (by Alexandre Deleyre) in the *Encyclopédie* sums up what they most bitterly opposed:

Fanaticism is blind and passionate zeal born of superstitious opinions, causing people to commit ridiculous, unjust, and cruel actions, not only without any shame or remorse, but even with a kind of joy and comfort. *Fanaticism*, therefore, is only superstition put into practice.

(Gendzier, 1967, p. 104)

At the heart of the fight against fanaticism was Voltaire. His plea for religious toleration – *Écrasez l'infâme!* (crush the infamous thing) – was the slogan with which he branded fanaticism and its attendant ills. But his protests combined prolific and eloquent criticism in print with the personal championing of individual cases. The most famous instance of *l'infâme* was the case of Jean Calas in 1762. Calas, a Protestant from Toulouse, was wrongfully convicted of having murdered his son for converting to Catholicism. (The young man had committed suicide.) Calas was condemned to death by the high court at Toulouse. The horrible sentence of breaking on the wheel was carried out. After a long and energetic campaign by Voltaire, the verdict was quashed. The triumph for Voltaire and Enlightenment – the Europe-wide publicity for the cause of reason, justice, penal reform and religious toleration – was spectacular.

The Enlightenment's concern for humanitarian reform fuelled the ambitions of the generation that came to maturity on the eve of the Revolution. The *Encyclopédie* popularised notions of equality and natural rights which had become commonplace by 1789. This concept of the rights that should come to us at birth was not, however,

normally related to more modern notions of equality of wealth and power. The Enlightenment was always conscious of what Boswell called 'the superiority of cultivated minds over the gross and illiterate' (Boswell, 1951, vol.2, p. 133) and of the fragility of civilisation in the face of riot and disorder. It was not until *after* the period covered by our course, in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, that there was any real extension of political rights to the masses. But there was a common conviction, propagated by the *philosophes*, that everyone had the right to equal justice before the law and the right not to be exploited by those enjoying power and privilege. Once again the cries for political reform were particularly strident in France, where injustice and inequality, long subject to Enlightenment criticism, were no longer felt to be tolerable.

In a broader sense, a concern for humanity manifested itself in a conviction of universal rights: everyone was entitled to be treated in a way fitting their dignity as a human being. In his poem *The Task* (1785) Cowper expressed his sorrow at man's inhumanity to man:

There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
It does not feel for man; the natural bond
Of brotherhood is severed as the flax
That falls asunder at the touch of fire.
He finds his fellow guilty of a skin
Not coloured like his own, and having power
To enforce the wrong, for such a worthy cause
Dooms and devotes him as his lawful prey.

(Benham, 1902, pp. 198–9)

The *philosophes* spoke out with a united voice against the slave trade. Voltaire and Diderot were among many who protested against it in the name of man's common humanity. Cugoana, in his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery*, used the term 'enlightened' to denote a humane code of conduct opposed to slavery, although not all Enlightenment thinkers expressed such opposition, so deeply entrenched was the practice in contemporary economic and political thought and activity. Boswell defended slavery, while Johnson opposed it. The ex-slave **Robert Wedderburn** (1762–1835), author of *The Horrors of Slavery* (1824) cited the Enlightenment authorities of truth, justice and the ancients in his vehement critique of the practice.

Summary point: humanitarianism and a concern with common human rights were central to the Enlightenment mission. In some, if not all, thinkers this led to an impulse to attack common inhumane practices such as religious oppression and slavery.

Exercise 7

Turn now to your AV Notes (click on 'View document' below), which will direct you to watch section 4 'Humanity and the noble savage'. When you have worked through this section of the video and attempted the exercise in the notes, return to this course.

Click '[View document](#)' to read the notes and exercise for video 4

Click on the blank screen below to start playing video 4 'Humanity and the noble savage'

Video content is not available in this format.

[Humanity and the noble savage](#)

As a young man, Voltaire had had two spells in the Bastille for impertinence towards members of the nobility, and the injustice and indignity rankled. Yet Voltaire, who later became immensely rich, was no social radical. The *philosophes* in general contributed little to political thought as such; they hardly troubled about which might be the best form of government for implementing their cherished reforms. Montesquieu, in his erudite and influential *De l'esprit des lois* (*On the Spirit of the Laws*, 1748), advocated a system of institutional checks and balances, and the separation or balancing of executive (governing) power, legislative (lawmaking) power and judicial power (the power of the judges) in order to counter the unlimited exercise of state power by the executive (the king). Montesquieu and Voltaire were much impressed by Britain's constitutional or 'limited' monarchy, in which the monarch's powers were curbed by a partly representative assembly (Parliament) and an independent judiciary. Britain was often compared favourably with absolute monarchy in France. But Voltaire, who had long since popularised British values in his *Philosophical Letters or Letters on the English* (1734), was also attracted by enlightened models of absolute monarchy, such as those practised in the second half of the eighteenth century by Frederick the Great of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, Joseph II of Austria (Mozart's patron), Gustav III of Sweden and Charles III of Spain. Voltaire, who was for a time historiographer royal to Louis XV until his independence and propensity for mischief-making made the court too hot to hold him, was moderate, pragmatic, undogmatic, flexible, and politically and socially conservative. Europe's traditional social structure being, so it was thought, fixed and immutable, it mattered little *how* enlightenment was implemented as long as it was implemented.

Exercise 8

Turn now to your AV Notes (click on 'View document' below), which will direct you to watch section 5, 'Frederick the Great and enlightened absolutism'. When you have worked through this section of the video and attempted the exercise in the notes, return to this course.

Click '[View document](#)' to read the notes and exercise for video 5

Click on the blank screen below to start playing video 5 'Frederick the Great and enlightened absolutism'

Video content is not available in this format.

[Frederick the Great and enlightened absolutism](#)

The *philosophes* and enlightened opinion generally believed that the *Encyclopédie* was proving its worth and that Enlightenment ideas were slowly but surely gaining ground among the educated across Europe. Voltaire himself, no starry-eyed optimist, thought so. His *Candide* (1759) is a mercilessly witty attack on facile optimism in the face of every kind of disaster: war, earthquakes and man's inhumanity to man. Nevertheless he wrote to a friend in 1764:

Everything I observe is sowing the seeds of a revolution that will inevitably come to pass, which I shall not have the pleasure of witnessing ... By degrees enlightenment has spread so widely that it will burst forth at the first opportunity, and then there will be a grand commotion. The younger generation are lucky: they will see some great things.

(Bruun, 1967, p. 102)

8.3.2 Revolution

It cannot be emphasised enough that neither Voltaire nor Rousseau nor anyone before 1789 anticipated the revolution that actually took place in France or the violent and bloody course that it took. What Voltaire looked forward to was an enlightened, humane and orderly society of moderate property owners, a society whose members were guaranteed freedom to worship (or not to worship), to read, publish and discuss whatever they wished, a humane penal system, the rule of law, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and impartial justice for all. These rights were duly proclaimed by the revolutionary National Assembly in 1789 in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

Rousseau, while not disdaining these rights, went much further in his insistence on linking freedom with morality. In *The Social Contract* he argued that society was a moral entity, not simply the aggregate of selfish individual preferences. The 'general will' or consensus of the people constituted a moral imperative binding on all members of society, and which, if they listened to the voice of conscience as well as to reason, all individuals truly desired in their heart. The good society should prescribe the strict morality, frugality and civic-mindedness conventionally attributed to ancient Sparta, republican Rome and Rousseau's native Calvinist Geneva. The state should enforce education and a religion that inculcated these virtues, and in the final analysis it should *compel* people to be good for, according to Rousseau, only the morally good individual could be truly free. The influence of Rousseau's ideas on the later course of the French Revolution can hardly be doubted. *The Social Contract* appeared in 32 editions across the decade 1789–99. Revolutionary leaders like **Maximilien de Robespierre** (1758–94), who came to power in 1793–4 and instigated the Terror, were fired by Rousseau's vision of the good society and cited his works to justify terror and coercion (see [Figure 13](#)). Rousseau himself had envisaged much gentler means of effecting change: consensual politics and (in his educational treatise *Émile*) good parenting lay at the heart of his agenda, rather than the bloodshed of the Terror and the enforcement of revolutionary norms by a minority of visionary fanatics assisted by a politically motivated street crowd.

Summary point: although the Enlightenment helped to prepare a climate of opinion which welcomed the French Revolution, the *philosophes* themselves did not foresee the Revolution or the way it developed.

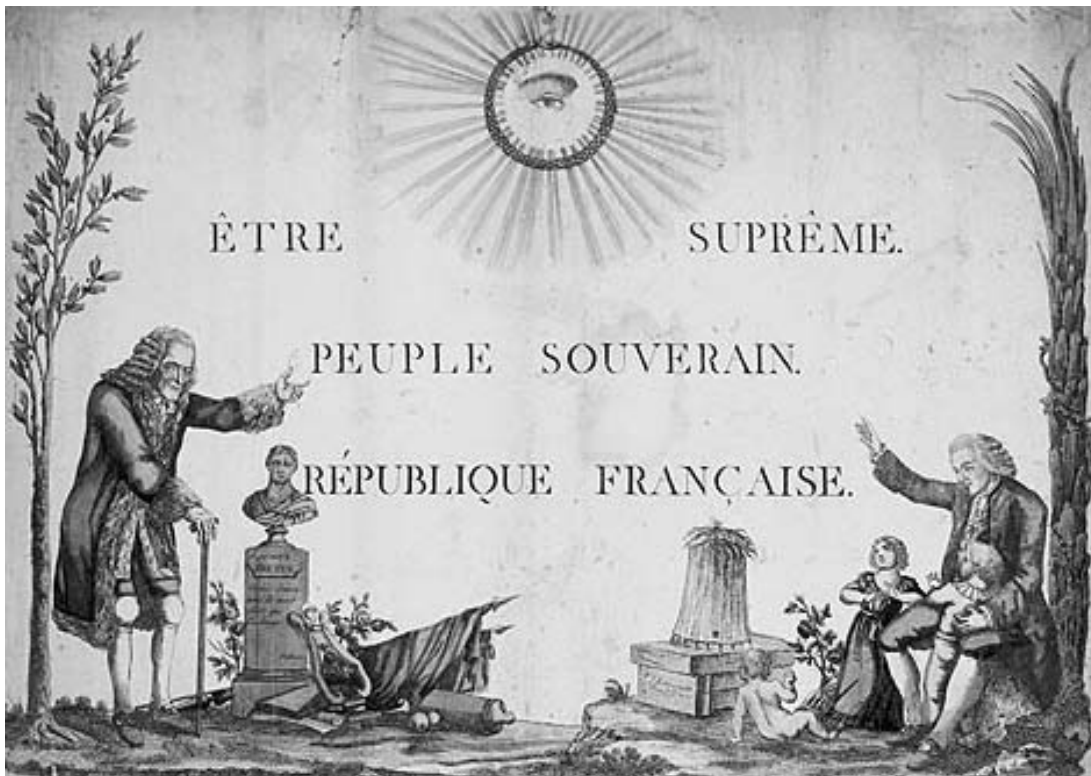


Figure 13 Anonymous, *Supreme Being, Sovereign People, French Republic*, 1794, Musées Carnavalet, Paris. Photo: Photothèque des musées de la ville de Paris/Philippe Ladet

It may be questioned whether Rousseau, who had drafted conventional constitutions intended for Corsica and Poland, had not in his *Social Contract* produced a piece of utopian thinking rather than a blueprint for practical implementation. At any rate, for most *philosophes* enlightenment was for the educated upper echelons of society. They wrote for the nobility and educated clergy, administrators, lawyers, academics, doctors and journalists, for the good bourgeois, the 'enlightened', 'judicious' and 'philosophic' reader of the *Encyclopédie*, not for the labouring poor or the unlettered masses. There were only 4,000 subscribers to the *Encyclopédie* – it was an expensive purchase (Gendzier, 1967, p. xx) – and those in France in sympathy with the Enlightenment numbered perhaps 50,000 out of a population of 20 million. The benefits of enlightenment would, it was hoped, trickle down in due course to the lower classes, but the potential of the masses for unrest was recognised and feared as a constant in history and a positive obstacle. For the masses, therefore, conventional religion remained a useful form of social control: 'Natural religion for the magistrates,' Voltaire wrote (in English), 'damn'd stuff [conventional religion] for the mob' (quoted in Dorn, 1940, p. 211).

The works of the Enlightenment, then, were produced by and for a cultivated elite. Its culture was that of coffee house, *salon*, theatre, chateau, academy and club. Its characteristics were sociability, reasonability, wit, learning, style, badinage and civilised discourse. The aristocratic audiences who heard Figaro's reproach to his master Count Almaviva in Beaumarchais's *Marriage of Figaro*, the Paris 'hit' of 1784, or in its operatic version by Mozart (1786), enjoyed the raillery at their own expense:

Because you are a *grand seigneur* you think yourself a great genius! Nobility, wealth, rank, offices: all this makes you high and mighty! What did you ever do to deserve all that? You took the trouble to be born, that's all!

(Lagarde and Michard, 1962, p. 400; trans. Lentin)

Likewise Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787) opens with Leporello's grumbles about his aristocratic master:

I want to be a gentleman, and I don't want to serve any longer, no, no, no, no, no, no.

(Bleiler, 1964, p. 85)

But reading these works as 'revolutionary' may be reading too much into them. In the first place clever and cheeky servants were the staple of comedy and comic opera, and *Don Giovanni* was described on the title page as just that: a comic opera (*dramma giocoso*). At any rate, even though someone in the pit on the first night of Beaumarchais's *Figaro* is said to have thrown an apple core at a duchess in a box, the aristocratic audiences had no inkling that their status and whole way of life were under threat. The traditional concept of society throughout Europe was a static one based on monarchy and a privileged nobility. If they thought about political revolution at all, it was in terms of a move to a more accountable, constitutional system on the British or perhaps the American model. No one dreamed of social upheaval. Marie Jean Antoine Nicholas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94), one of the most radical *philosophes*, ardent for rights for women and blacks, was sure of one thing in 1789: monarchy was impregnable. Mme de la Tour du Pin, a young Frenchwoman in 1789, recalled that she and her aristocratic friends were 'laughing and dancing our way to the precipice. Thinking people were content to talk of abolishing all the abuses. France, they said, was about to be reborn. The word "revolution" was never uttered' (quoted in Davies, 1997, p. 674).

If the Enlightenment was elitist it was also male-driven. To some extent this is to misrepresent the period. Engaging women authors included Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) and the novelist Jane Austen. **Mme de Staël** (1766–1817), one of the most influential women of the period, formed a bridge between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. In other respects, however, you may begin to appreciate the very real male bias of the culture and consider the challenges faced even by women with connections of wealth and power like Stael. How much greater, then, must have been the difficulties faced by women like **Mary Prince** (1788–c.1834), a former slave, in finding a voice with which to express their own views and experiences. It was widely accepted that more educated women might become involved in amateur study such as drawing, music or botany. However, women who, like **Jane Marcet** (1769–1858), wished to become involved in the study of science, either required influential connections (for example, entrance to a high society *salon*) or were forced to engage in their study in private, domestic settings such as the drawing room; grand public settings were overwhelmingly a male domain. It is true that French women in particular became much more politically active during the Revolution, and that in Britain women intellectuals such as Wollstonecraft reinforced such efforts. But society generally was not ready to establish or endorse this growing female militancy in any sustained way.

Summary point: Enlightenment culture was mainly by and for the privileged elite. This elite was fearful of the potentially disruptive power of the uneducated masses. Nor was it ready to embrace equality of the sexes.

In every sense the French Revolution came as an appalling shock to the system, and it marks the great watershed in the period covered by this course (see [Figure 14](#)). When, at Valmy in 1792, an army of French revolutionaries put to flight a regular Prussian force intent on stamping out the Revolution in the name of the Old Regime, Goethe, who was

present, declared: 'Here today a new epoch of world history begins' (quoted in Mowat, 1934, p. 328). Condorcet wrote an optimistic *Sketch of a Historical Tableau of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1793), a noble statement of his faith in the future and a summation of Enlightenment expectations; but he wrote in the shadow of the guillotine, and he committed suicide to avoid execution. The clear-headed confidence, perhaps over-confidence, of the *philosophes* in the possibility of progress and human potential for good received its comeuppance after 1789. Many began to have second thoughts about their mission, and in their doubts, as well as in the work of those who continued in the mainstream Enlightenment tradition, lie some of the seeds of Romanticism.



Figure 14 Anonymous, *Exercise of the Rights of Man and French Citizen*, 1792, engraving, Bibliotheque nationale de France, Paris. The French Revolution as seen by its royalist critics

Edmund Burke voiced these reservations eloquently in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which became the bible of those who opposed the Revolution and who took what henceforth was to become known as a 'conservative' stance. To those in Britain who expressed admiration for the Revolution and saw it as a model for imitation, Burke argued that the British constitution, far from being (as British radicals argued), a mere political convenience to be rewritten or torn up at will, was an organic entity to be nurtured

and venerated like some ancient oak. It was the fruit of tradition, it distilled the collective wisdom of bygone ages, it was a bond between past and present, a trust from history, binding on the living. Sympathisers who applauded Burke included Catherine the Great, on whom Voltaire had lavished praise for her support of Enlightenment causes and as a paragon of 'enlightened absolutism', and the historian Edward Gibbon. Gibbon, who in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* had exercised much wit and learning at the expense of Christianity, now drew back in fear of the wider, and alarming, social implications of the Enlightenment. Of the French Revolution, Gibbon wrote to his patron Lord Sheffield in 1792, 'If this tremendous warning has no effect on the men of property in England, ... you will deserve your fate' (Morley, 1891, p. 253). When, the same year, the House of Commons voted against the abolition of slavery, Gibbon declaimed against Wilberforce and his fellow owners: 'in this rage against slavery, in the numerous petitions against the slave trade, was there no leaven of new democratical principles? No wild ideas of the rights and natural equality of man? It is these I fear' (Hampson, 1968, p. 153). For in Britain, to be radical meant to aim at reform of an ineffective and corrupt monarchy and electoral system; to be extremely radical meant sharing the views of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine (1737–1809), Joseph Priestley, Thomas Beddoes (1760–1808), William Godwin (1756–1836) and others (including the poet **William Wordsworth**, 1770–1850), who all, at least initially, expressed enthusiasm for the French Revolution and called for far-reaching democratic reform at home, thus intensifying the vehement conservative backlash.

Summary point: the French Revolution strongly divided educated opinion in Europe. To be against the Revolution was to adopt a 'conservative' philosophy, which cast doubts on the reformist ambitions of the Enlightenment.

8.4 The Enlightenment and modernity

In its desire to replace outmoded, irrational ways of thinking by the rational, the sensible and the progressive, the Enlightenment was self-consciously modern. A manifestly scientific age and the visible advancement of knowledge in the eighteenth century required, it was felt, an overhaul – or at least a careful critical and radical scrutiny – of culture, society and their institutions. This was the implicit message of the *Encyclopédie*. Its contributors were convinced that they were motivated by feelings of beneficent humanity, that they were on the side of the future and that the future was on their side. In spite of its allegiance to the classical tradition, the Enlightenment was a modernising force, keen to review and regenerate culture and society. The classics themselves were often used as authorities to support change. When Diderot argued in the *Encyclopédie* article 'Epicureanism' for a moral code that legitimised the pursuit of pleasure, he appealed to the authority of the ancient philosopher Epicurus. Napoleon was described by Stendhal as 'imbued with Roman ideas' (Stendhal, 2004, p. 53), though the Roman style and emblems of his rule moved rapidly from republican to imperial. When William Gilpin set out his new aesthetic of the picturesque, he cited the poets Ovid and Virgil to exemplify the evocative landscape effects he sought in art. Excavations of ancient sites such as Pompeii and Herculaneum and new scholarship on antiquity brought fresh models and inspiration to architects and their patrons. Architects such as Soane invigorated their architecture by drawing on such scholarship. More broadly, the Enlightenment's mission of rational scrutiny and reform opened the way for changes of attitude and values among the educated sections of society. Diderot described the purpose of the *Encyclopédie* as being 'to change people's way of thinking'. As we have

seen, moral codes were secularized; deism was promoted as a more rational, acceptable version of religion. Authority of all kinds – monarchical and ecclesiastical as well as noble privilege – was challenged. These changes were accelerated and converted to action in France by the Revolution, which swept away within a few years what it called the Old Regime, the old social and political order and the privileges of nobles and clergy.

In 1790 the French first adopted a form of constitutional monarchy on the British model, guided and restricted by a legislative assembly representative of a wider, though by no means completely inclusive, constituency. Respect for noble birth was replaced by respect for men of property regardless of their lineage. The relatively moderate reforms of the early years of the Revolution then gave way to more violent upheavals, as resentment stirred against the new aristocracy of the rich. The monarchy was replaced by a republic (see Figure 15), which in turn, under pressure of war and civil war, soon fell under the sway of a ruthless dictatorship. When the violence had abated and political power was once more restored to a property-owning elite, there was scope for a large new meritocracy with equal citizenship and equal treatment before the law. While under the Old Regime no one had been admitted to the French court since 1760 unless he could trace his noble ancestry back to the fourteenth century, Napoleon's declared maxim was *la carrière ouverte aux talents* (careers open to talent). His claim that every foot-soldier carried in his knapsack the baton of a marshal of France was not literally true; nevertheless his marshals and administrators included men of humble origin brought to positions of authority by the needs of the Revolution and the Napoleonic empire, and even raised to Napoleon's imperial nobility. These were spectacular changes on an unprecedented scale. When Napoleon rose to power, the changes were seen as gleaming signs of France's modernity, a model to be imposed on the rest of Europe. Napoleon could be seen as the 'son of the Revolution' who guaranteed its positive achievements while protecting its beneficiaries from the former anarchy and violence of the urban crowd.

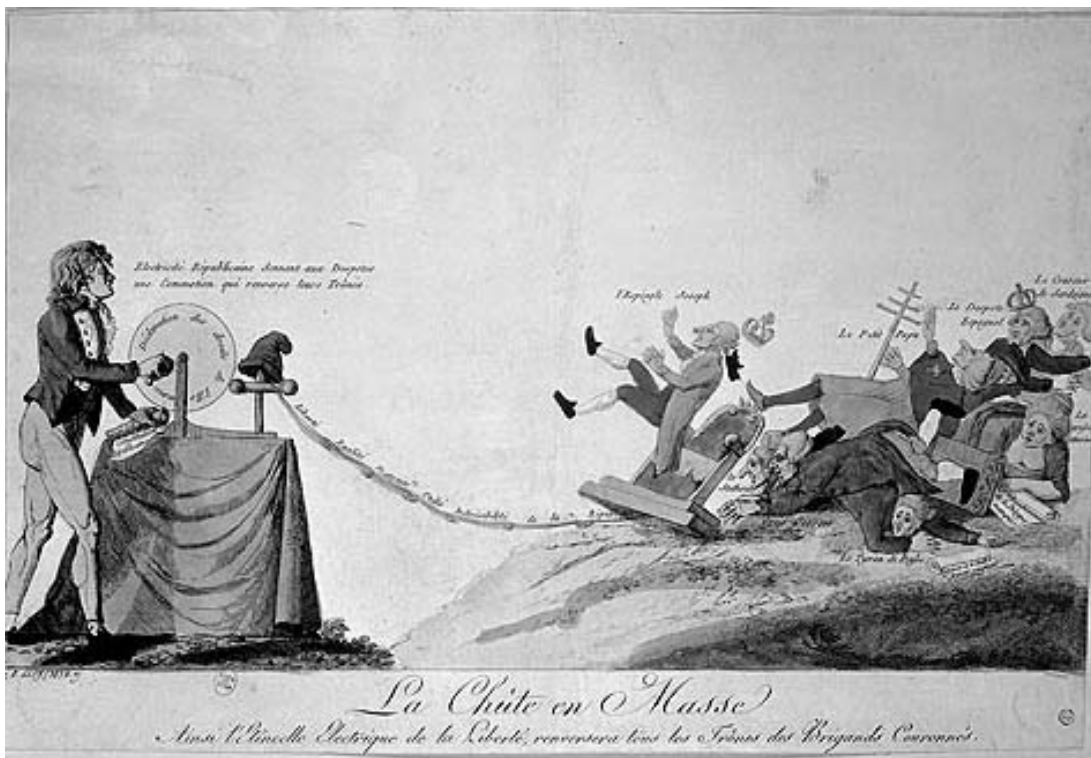


Figure 15 Anonymous, *La Chute en masse* (They all fall down), caricature print, Musee

Carnavalet, Paris. Photo: © RMN/Bulloz. Enlightenment and modernity combine in this depiction of the electric spark of liberty overturning the thrones of the crowned heads of Europe and the Pope

Napoleon's image as 'son of the Revolution', restorer of order, product of the Enlightenment, bearer of civilisation and 'great man' often masked a brutal political cynicism. The painting by the French artist **Antoine-Jean Gros** (1771–1835), *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken of Jaffa* (1804), shows Napoleon as compassionate hero when he had in fact just authorised a number of violent atrocities during the Egyptian campaign. From the first, he suppressed freedom of expression and the press, reintroduced slavery in the French colonies, and came to be seen by many as another brand of tyrant. But it was some years before Europe lost faith in the positive, modernising energy he seemed to represent, and after his fall he was missed as a vigorous, inspiring and enlightened alternative to the reactionary restored Bourbon monarchy. Spain, attached to its Catholic and social traditions, resisted his modernity as it fought his invading armies, and Napoleon's imperial ambition to complete his domination over the whole of Europe stimulated national self-consciousness as a counteracting force in Spain, Russia and Germany.

Another modernising force in the period covered by the course was the growing pace of industrialisation, as the methods of cottage outworkers were gradually replaced by mass factory production of goods. As people moved increasingly to work in towns, old social communities and values were under threat, and it was in such a climate that Evangelical Christianity began to thrive. The concept of 'modernity' is often associated with the secular, rational and progressive aspects of the Enlightenment, more specifically with the growing status of secular public opinion (Porter, 2000, p. 23). The process of 'modernising' permeated culture in all kinds of ways, however, and was certainly not restricted to the secular. Evangelicals defined a new kind of faith in response to growing concerns about the ability of traditional Anglicanism to meet the needs of a swiftly changing society. The poet William Cowper and the Evangelical Christian John Newton collaborated on the production of new hymns for the parish of Olney. Together with the anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce, they turned their backs on the growing pursuit of material prosperity that came with industrialisation in order to define more exacting or rewarding routes to salvation. Reacting against what he saw as a detrimental decline in faith, Wilberforce proposed an alternative, spiritually inspired modernity in the form of a religion that built on personal experience while rejecting superstition. The modernising forces of the Enlightenment could, then, take the form of regeneration rather than the violent break with tradition produced by the Revolution.

The modernity of the Enlightenment also had aesthetic consequences. Whig landowners in Britain wishing to assert their independence from conservative royalist politics 'modernised' the landscape by sweeping away rambling, picturesque gardens associated with nostalgia and replacing them with the extensive lawns and artificial water courses made fashionable by the landscape designer Capability Brown (see [Figure 16](#)). They built obtrusive, gleaming white Palladian mansions in a grand classical style in dominating positions within 'wild' landscapes such as the Lake District in order to assert their modern taste and their will for change. And yet such impulses towards modernity did not remain unchallenged. The Enlightenment's own respect for nature stimulated lively debate among thinkers such as William Wordsworth, Uvedale Price and William Gilpin about the extent to which art and artifice should alter the natural appearance of the landscape. The scene was set for a man versus nature dialectic that would lie at the heart of Romantic concerns.

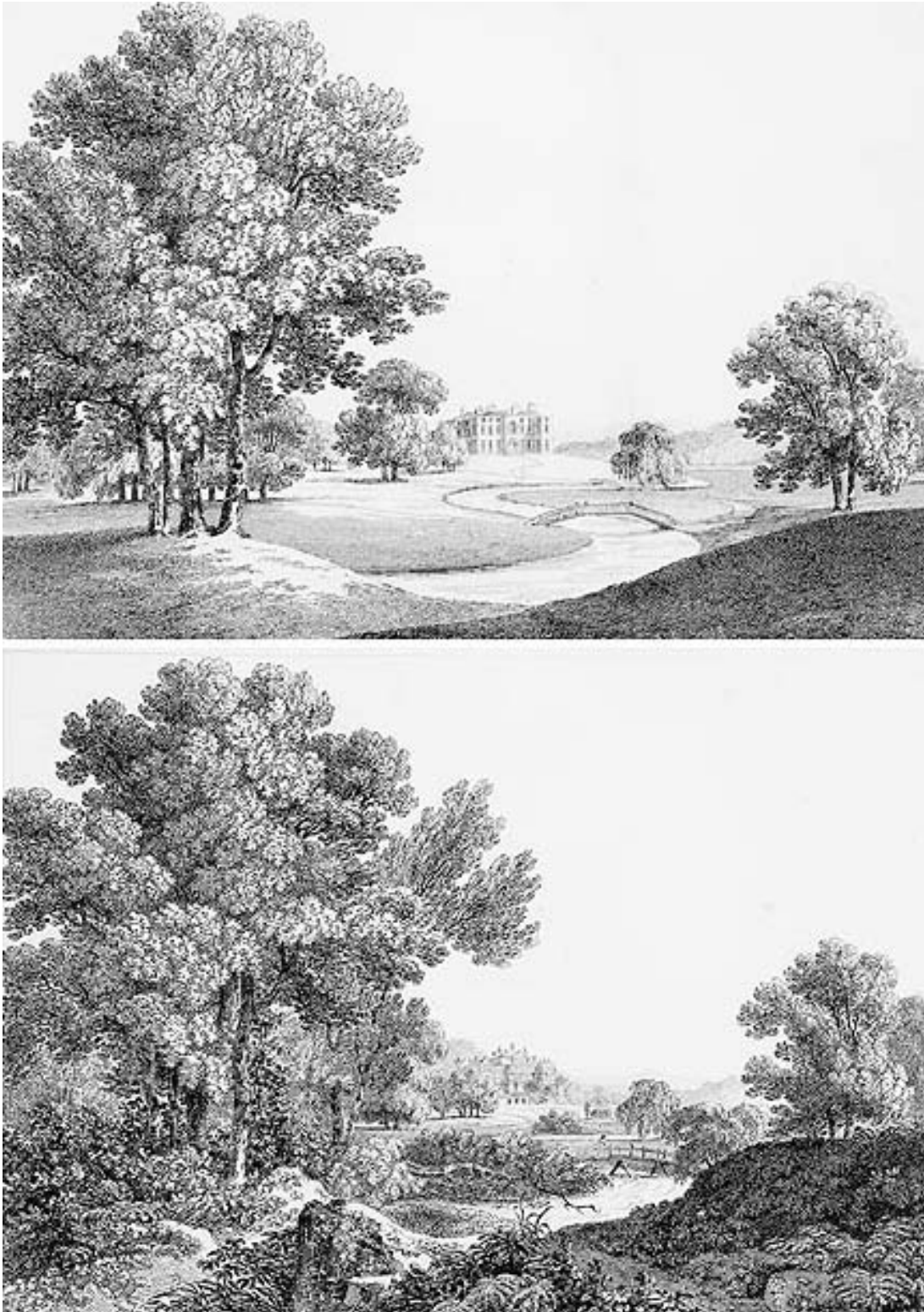


Figure 16 B.T. Pouncy, after T. Hearne, engravings from R. Payne Knight, *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem*, 1794. Photo: by permission of the British Library. The methods of Kent and Capability Brown as parodied by R. Payne Knight. The upper of the two engravings shows the 'nature' of the 'Improvers' with its shaven lawns, 'nude waters', monotonous 'clumps' and serpentine walks. The lower shows the return to nature advocated by Knight and other champions of the picturesque school

Summary point: the Enlightenment was characterised by an impulse towards modernity in matters of government, politics, religion and aesthetics. There were those, however, who questioned the rapid momentum and effects of change.

9 Conclusion

9.1 Key characteristics of the enlightenment

Exercise 9

Try to note down as many of the key characteristics of the Enlightenment as you can remember

How did you manage this? Did you remind yourself of some of the main characteristics by checking the summary points? The exercise you have just carried out is one of *consolidation and revision*.

Exercise 10

Click on 'View document' below to read the anonymous article from the *Encyclopédie*, 'Philosophe' (1765). What characteristics of the enlightened thinker are identified in it? How useful or significant do you find this description of a typical *philosophe*?

Click below to read 'Philisophe'.

[Philosophe](#)

Rational action, following the 'torch' or light of reason, empirical verification of knowledge ('bases his principles on an infinite number of particular observations') and a focus on useful knowledge ('he knows its true value'), scepticism ('he can suspend judgement'), sociability ('sociable qualities'), contributing to civilised society ('who wants to give pleasure and make himself useful'), 'full of humanity', 'honour and integrity', 'kneaded with the yeast of order and rules': these are some of the qualities you may have found, or you may have noted different ones. The description in the article seems to offer an ideal, with which actual *philosophes* would have complied to varying degrees. But it does appear to sum up nicely the guiding spirit of the Enlightenment. There is even, at the end, a characteristic note of reformist propaganda as a plea is made for enlightened rulers.

You should now be able to track the appearance of some of the characteristics of the Enlightenment outlined in this course. You will also be able to challenge and refine some of the generalisations made, and begin to appreciate how these ideas changed in nature and emphasis as they were embodied in actual texts produced by individual minds. It can be useful to reconstruct the cultural history of the past in such a way that trends, conflicts and developments emerge more clearly, and it is certainly valuable when assessing our own responses to consider the larger picture. We hope that our attempts at definitions will offer you a window into the period.

The process of producing culture is complex. In our period these cross-currents included the emergence and establishment of Romanticism. It may not be possible, in many cases, to classify the texts you encounter straightforwardly as 'enlightened' or 'Romantic'. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to signal at this stage some of the main shifts or cultural

changes that characterised or accompanied the transition from a European culture greatly influenced by Enlightenment through to one in which Romanticism acquired growing importance. We summarise these shifts below.

9.2 Cultural shifts: from Enlightenment to Romanticism, c.1780–1830

1. A growing impulse towards revolution, rupture, transformation and radicalism.
2. A growing scepticism about the potential to identify objective, empirically validated and universally valid truths, and an increased emphasis on subjectivity.
3. An increasing emphasis on the self, introspection, identity and individualism.
4. A growing exploitation and intensification of an aesthetic of the sublime.
5. A growing adaptation of classical sources to a modern psyche, heightened by a concern to identify, respect and differentiate 'authentic' classical practices; alongside this, a growing attraction towards non-classical sources of inspiration, such as the Gothic, the Oriental and the 'exotic'.
6. An increasing incorporation of the personal and private into public culture and an increasing use of public culture for self-promotion.
7. A shift from reason to sentiment and passion.
8. An increasingly subjective and relativist approach to morality and a growing emphasis on individual liberty.
9. A growing appreciation of both the dynamism and restorative powers of nature and of its intimate connection with human thought, morality and feelings.
10. The triumph of the notion of genius and self-expression; a growing emphasis on the autonomous creativity of the imagination.
11. A growing preoccupation with death and an impulse towards melancholy, immortality, the divine, the unintelligible, the unseen, mystical and supernatural.
12. A growing critique of absolute monarchy and a thrust towards republicanism and political liberty; the cult of the hero and of the will.
13. Rapidly growing industrialisation and the continuing rise of a capitalist bourgeoisie.
14. A consolidation of colonialism in tension with an increasing fascination with 'non-European' cultures and with cultural and national identities generally; a sweeping momentum in the movement for the abolition of slavery.
15. A growing consciousness of the political influence and cultural identities of the people/working classes.

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Figure 2 Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, Denis Diderot, 1777, bronze, 52 x 34.5 x 25.5cm, Louvre, Paris. © Photo: RMN/© Gerard Blot/ Christian Jean;

Figure 3 Photograph of: Anicet Charles Gabriel Lemonnier, "A Reading in the Salon of Mme Geoffrin", 1775, oil on canvas, 129 x 196cm. © Photo: RMN/ Daniel Arnaudet;

Figure 4 Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Fussli), The Artist Moved By the Grandeur of Antique Fragments, 1778-80, red chalk and sepia wash on paper, 42 x 35.5cm, Kunsthhaus, Zurich. Photo: Lauros/ Giraudon/ Bridgeman Art Library;

Figure 5 F.G.Adam, marble statues of Apollo and Venus, 1740, Frederick the Great's Palace, Sans-Souci. Photo: Paul Kafno;

Figure 6 Lady Diana Beauclerk, caricature of Edward Gibbon, c. 1770, pen drawing, British Museum, London. Photo: by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum;

Figure 7 Nicolas Poussin, The Holy Family in Egypt (1655-7), 105 x 145.5cm, State Hermitage Museum. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library;

Figure 8 Michel-Ange Houasse, The Drawing Academy c 1725, 61 x 72.5cm, oil on canvas, Royal Palace, Madrid. Photo © Patrimonio Nacional;

Figure 9 François Boucher, The Triumph of Venus, 1740, oil on canvas, 130 x 162cm, National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm. Photo: National Museum of Fine Arts;

Figure 10 Springsguth after Krik, Rousseau Contemplating the Wild Beauties of Switzerland, 1797, engraving. Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library;

Figure 11 Etienne Aubry, Paternal Love, 1775, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 101.5cm, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library;

Figure 12 Thomas Rowlandson, The Triumph of Sentiment (Butcher Weeping Over Werther), 1787, Goethe Museum, Dusseldorf;

Figure 13 Anonymous, Supreme Being, Sovereign People, French Republic, 1794, Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Photo: © PMVP/ Ladet;

Figure 14 Anonymous, "Exercise of the Rights of Man and French Citizen", 1792, engraving, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris;

Figure 15 Anonymous, La chute en masse (They all fall down), caricature print, Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Photo: © RMN/© Bulloz;

Figure 16 B.T.Pouncy, after T.Hearne, engravings from R. Payne Knight, The Landscape, A Didactic Poem, 1794. © The British Library. All Rights Reserved.

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Figure V1.1 A.J.Deferht, "The Art of Writing", engraving from the Encyclopédie, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, shelfmark: fol.BS 477 Pl. III.

Figure V1.2 Lithotomy operation (cutting for the stone), from the article 'Surgery' in the Encyclopédie, 1763, facsimile edn, New York, Dover Publications;

Figure V1.3 Canaletto, Ruins of the Forum, Looking Towards The Capitol, 1740, drawing, 191 x 106cm, The Royal collection © 2006, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Photo: reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen.

Figure V1.4 Sir Joshua Reynolds, Portrait of Omai, c. 1775, oil on canvas, 225 x 143 cm, private collection. Photo: Sothebys, London

Figure V1.5 J.H.C. Franke, Frederick the great, 1764, oil on canvas, Cambridge University Library. Photo: by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

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