This enthusiasm for and idealization of Pacific Islanders was seldom extended towards Africans or Afro-Caribbeans, who were commonly considered as inferior. This was a convenient view for those who benefited from the brutal but highly lucrative slave trade.

The *philosophes* were unanimous in their opposition to slavery, and de Jaucourt denounced it in his article ‘The slave trade’ in the *Encyclopédie*. The essential objection was that slavery was a violation of our common human nature. As de Jaucourt wrote:

This buying of Negroes to reduce them to slavery is one business that violates religion, morality, natural laws, and all the rights of human nature.

(Gendzier, 1967, p.229)

A very few former African slaves, such as Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho, succeeded in British society, thus vindicating the Enlightenment belief in basic human equality.

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**EXERCISE**

1. How do you account for the attraction of the myth of the noble savage for men and women of the Enlightenment?

2. Why were the Encyclopedists hostile to the slave trade?

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**DISCUSSION**

1. The myth of the noble savage appeared to provide a striking combination of freedom and happiness, and to demonstrate the inherent goodness of human nature. The discovery of the South Sea Islanders and the visit to Britain of men like Omai seemed to lend substance to the myth and attracted much uncritical acceptance of it.

2. The *philosophes* were unanimously critical of the slave trade both because of its savage excesses and cruelty and because it denied to the Africans and Afro-Caribbeans the inherent dignity as human beings which men such as Equiano and Sancho showed they could put to good use.

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**Section 5: Frederick the Great and enlightened absolutism**

Unit 1 argues that the *philosophes* were usually open-minded about forms of government. Voltaire was particularly eclectic, approving of constitutional monarchy in Britain and royal absolutism in France, provided that the government was enlightened. Near the end of the article ‘Philosophe’ from the *Encyclopédie*, which forms an appendix to Unit 1, the author cites approvingly a saying of the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius: ‘How happy peoples will be when kings are
philosophers or when philosophers are kings!’ (p.63). The author underscores his message by adding: ‘Graft a sovereign on to a philosopher ... and you will have a perfect sovereign.’ In the second half of the eighteenth century several monarchs were influenced to a greater or lesser degree by aspects of the Enlightenment and are often referred to by historians as practitioners of ‘enlightened absolutism’. The main examples are mentioned on p.48 of Unit 1.

In the final section, the video touches very briefly on the many-sided and controversial Frederick the Great of Prussia (Figure VI.5), but exclusively from the viewpoint of his connections with some of the aspects of the Enlightenment mentioned in sections 1 to 4. Absolute ruler of Prussia from 1740 to 1786, Frederick described himself as ‘a king by duty and a philosophe by inclination’. The remark was significant. It was not that he was a reluctant ruler: he did not hesitate to ride roughshod over the pacifism of most of the philosophes in what he considered the interests of the state, turning Prussia into a militaristic state and sparking off the two great wars of the eighteenth century, 1740–8 and 1756–62. In many other respects, however, he showed himself remarkably enlightened.

Frederick was culturally speaking a Francophile, who wrote copiously on many themes central to the Enlightenment, including literature, history, philosophy, scientific progress and the arts. He corresponded with several philosophes, including Condorcet, d'Alembert, and particularly Voltaire. D'Alembert and Voltaire visited him at Sans-Souci. Voltaire stayed there for three years (1750–3). Their relationship was chequered and Voltaire outstayed his welcome, but each admired the other's attachment to the Enlightenment:

You suppose that I think that the people need the curb of religion in order to be controlled. I assure you these are not my sentiments. On the contrary ... a society could not exist without laws, but it could certainly exist without religion, provided that there is a power which, by punitive sanctions, can compel the masses to obey these laws. This is confirmed by the experience of the savages discovered in the Marianne Islands [the Maldive Islands], who had not a metaphysical idea in their heads. It is proved still more by the government of China, where deism is the religion of all the leading men in the state ... I see the present work of the philosophes as very useful, because men ought to be made to feel ashamed of fanaticism and intolerance, and because it is a service to humanity to fight these cruel and atrocious follies ... To destroy fanaticism is to dry up the most deadly source of division and hatred in European memory, the bloody traces of which are found among all its peoples.

(Frederick II to Voltaire, c.15 December 1766, quoted in Lentin, 1985, p.138)
Figure VI.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.

'He talked to me about literature, philosophy, even politics and war and peace. I would need a whole volume to give you an idea of his conversation. All I can tell you ... is that the King impressed me as greater even than he is by reputation' (d’Alembert to Mlle de Lespinaise, 13 June 1763).

EXERCISE What aspects of Frederick’s enlightenment emerge from section 5 of the video?

DISCUSSION Aspects of Frederick’s enlightenment mentioned include:

- his promotion of mass inoculation against smallpox;
- his repeal of harsh penalties against infanticide\(^1\) and a more understanding attitude towards unmarried mothers;
- his respect for classical antiquity, an interest in non-European cultures, and religious toleration and open-mindedness.

\(^1\) Outside Prussia the crime was punished by public execution. The young Goethe witnessed one such execution in Frankfurt in 1772.
After viewing

You might go through the article ‘Philosophe’, which forms an appendix to Unit 1 (pp.61–3), noting connections with themes raised in sections 1–5 of the video. The article relates directly to section 1, since it was published in the Encyclopédie, but your reading should also suggest links with other sections.

References


Music heard on the video

1 Joseph Haydn, Symphony no. 12 in B flat major, Menuetto.
2 Johann Sebastian Bach, Brandenburg concerto no. 3 in G, Allegro.
3 Joseph Haydn, Symphony no. 12 in B flat major, Finale/Presto.
4 KPM Music 315, Andy Clark, World Music 2, Exotic Journeys.
5 Johann Sebastian Bach, Brandenburg concerto no. 3 in G, Allegro.

Illustrations shown on the video

Section 1

Pages from the Encyclopédie, published 1751–72.
Nicolas Poussin, Spring (also called Adam and Eve in Earthly Paradise), 1660–4, Louvre, Paris.
Michel Van Loo, Diderot, 1767, Louvre, Paris.
J.G. Ziesenis, Frederick the Great, c.1760.
After Jean Huber, Voltaire Writing, engraving.
Section 2

Pages from the *Encyclopédie*.

Section 3


Angelica Kaufmann, *J.J. Winkelmann*, 1764, Kunsthauis, Zurich.


The Towneley Collection, British Museum (filmed on location).

Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire (filmed on location).

Section 4


‘Slave man hung’, from Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revoluted Negroes of Surinam*, 1806.

‘Slave woman hung’, from Stedman, *Narrative of Five Years’ Expedition*, 1806.

*Olaudah Equiano*, Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

**Section 5**


P.C. Baquoy after N.A. Monsian, *Voltaire and Frederick at Sans-Souci*, early nineteenth-century engraving, Ullstein Bilderdienst.


Mother breast-feeding infant, anonymous chalk engraving, Wellcome Foundation.

Drawing of battle scene, from A. Palmer, *Frederick the Great*.

Palace and park of Sans-Souci, Potsdam (filmed on location).