

The Enlightenment Philosophers: What was Their Main Idea?

The late 17th and 18th century was a period of many changes. Between discoveries in science and disagreements over religion, people were questioning traditional ways of living and knowing. Thinkers called *philosophes* (“philosophers” in French) were particularly hopeful that they might discover new ways to understand and improve their society.

One belief that the *philosophes* shared is that Nature is an excellent teacher. They believed that there are **natural laws** or truths that people do not always recognize. They believed that if people observe their surroundings they could discover patterns in nature that could be applied to human activities like government and economics.

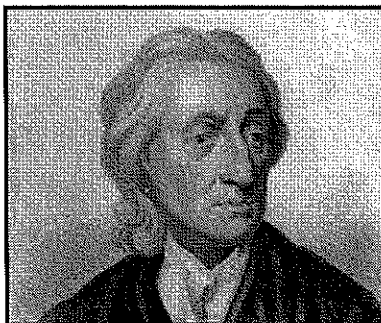
Another belief the *philosophes* shared was their confidence in people’s ability to use reason to discover truths. In fact, this Enlightenment period in history is often called the *Age of Reason*. Intellectuals believed that if they used the reasoning powers God or nature had given them, they could answer any question. A combination of careful observation and clear-headed reasoning were the two keys to understanding the truth of all things.

One reason the *philosophes* believed in the existence of natural laws was the work of the famous scientist Isaac Newton (1642–1727). By making new observations and studying the observations of other physicists before him, Newton noticed

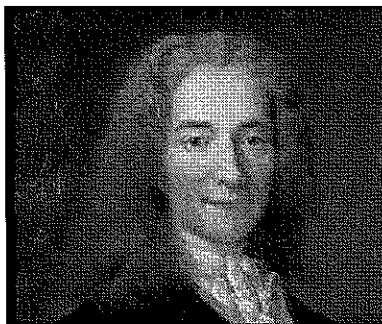
patterns in the physical universe. Newton proved that the force that pulls objects to earth is the same as the force that holds the planets in orbit around an unmoving sun. Newton called this force “gravity” and described how it worked in several strokes of genius we call “Newton’s laws.”

The *philosophes* believed that what Newton learned about planets they could learn about people. In other words, if there were rules that explain how objects in the sky behave, there must be natural rules or laws that explain how people behave. They believed these laws were **universal**; that is, they could be found everywhere, and simply had to be discovered. Many a *philosophe* hoped that he or she could become the Isaac Newton of the **social sciences**.

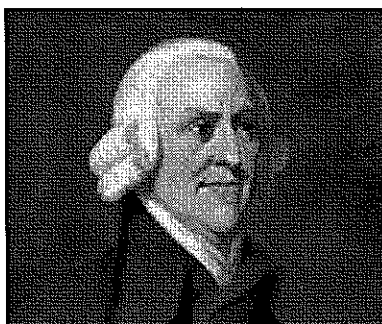
This Mini-Q presents the ideas of four *philosophes* writing about four different areas of human society: government, religion, the economy, and the social role of women. Your first job is to understand what they are saying. Their language is not always easy but the passages are short. Then, as you move from document to document, ask yourself if there is one important idea that keeps reappearing, an idea that is basic to all four thinkers. In other words, answer the question before us: *The Enlightenment Philosophers: What was their main idea?*



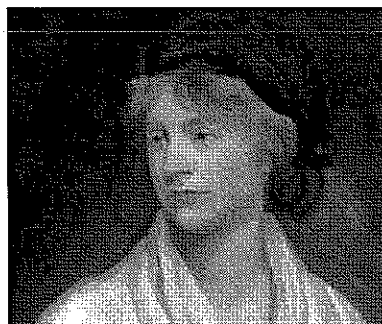
John Locke



Voltaire



Adam Smith



Mary Wollstonecraft

Background Essay Questions

1. What two centuries were the centuries of the *philosophes*?
2. What did the *philosophes* hope to accomplish?
3. What two tools did the *philosophes* believe are necessary to find out the truth of things?
4. What is another name for the Enlightenment period?
5. How did Isaac Newton inspire the *philosophes*?
6. Define these terms::

philosophe

natural law

universal

social sciences

Timeline

- 1633** – Galileo condemned by the Catholic Church for arguing that the sun is the center of the universe.
- 1687** – Isaac Newton’s *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* becomes one of his several pioneering works of scientific inquiry.
- 1690** – John Locke’s influential *Two Treatises on Civil Government* is published.
- 1693** – Salem witch trials take place in Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- 1733** – Voltaire writes *Letters Concerning the English Nation*.
- 1776** – American colonies declare independence from the British monarchy.
Adam Smith’s important economics book *The Wealth of Nations* is published.
- 1789** – The French Revolution occurs; the chaos and violence that followed within a few years is widely considered to be the end of the Enlightenment.
- 1792** – Mary Wollstonecraft publishes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.