

Liberty, Equality, and the Social Contract: Reassessing Enlightenment Political Ideas

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Abstract

The Enlightenment, an intellectual movement in 18th-century Europe, was stimulated by the Scientific Revolution. Like the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment involved an application of the natural, humanistic attitudes typical of the Renaissance. The Enlightenment or the Age of Reason is names given to the predominant intellectual movement of the eighteenth century. It was an intellectual movement among the upper and middle-class elites. It involved a new worldview that explained the world and sought answers through reason rather than faith, and through an optimistic, natural, humanistic approach rather than a fatalistic, supernatural one. The central doctrines of the Enlightenment were individual liberty, representative government, the rule of law, and religious freedom, in contrast to an absolute monarchy or single-party state and the religious persecution of faiths other than those formally established and often controlled outright by the State.

The article explores how the concept of the social contract serves as a theoretical foundation for legitimising political authority through the consent of the governed. For Locke, the establishment of political society was aimed at protecting natural rights—namely, life, liberty, and property—while Rousseau highlighted the significance of the general will in promoting collective freedom and equality. Montesquieu's support for constitutionalism and institutional checks further bolstered the Enlightenment critique of concentrated power. By revisiting these concepts, the article underscores how Enlightenment political thought has laid the intellectual foundation for contemporary democratic governance, constitutionalism, and discussions surrounding human rights.

Simultaneously, the article offers a critical reassessment of the limitations and contradictions inherent in Enlightenment political thought, particularly the tensions between universal ideals and their inconsistent application throughout history. Through this analysis, the study illustrates that the principles of liberty, equality, and the social contract continue to be central to modern discussions on democracy, political legitimacy, and justice. Ultimately, the Enlightenment remains an essential normative framework for understanding the development of the contemporary political order and the ongoing quest for freedom and equality in political life.

Keywords: Enlightenment Political Thought, Social Contract Theory, Liberty, Equality, Natural Rights, Popular Sovereignty, Constitutionalism, Modern Democracy

Introduction

The diversified and adversarial character of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, popularly known as the Age of Reason, pays homage to the enormous intellectual ferment of the earlier century.¹ The Enlightenment, also referred to as the Age of Enlightenment,² or even 'the Century of Lights'.³ It

absolutely was a philosophical movement that dominated the realm of approaches in Europe in the 18th century. The Enlightenment integrated an array of thoughts focused on reason as the prime factor of authority and legitimacy, and also came to advance principles just like liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state.⁴ The concepts of the Enlightenment undermined the authority of the monarchy along with the Church, and provided the means for the political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.⁵ A variety of 19th-century movements, including liberalism and neo-classicism, find their intellectual legacy back to the Enlightenment.⁶

The Enlightenment proposed reason as a method to establish an authoritative process of aesthetics, ethics, government, or even religion, which might permit people to attain objective truth about the whole of reality. Emboldened by the revolution in physics founded by Newtonian kinematics, Enlightenment thinkers argued that reason could free individuals from superstition and religious authoritarianism that had invoked trouble and fatality to millions in religious wars. As well, the wide accessibility of knowledge was made possible through the development of encyclopaedias, providing the Enlightenment reason for informing the human race.⁷

The Politics of Enlightenment

Enlightenment presumed in institutionalism as well as in civil liberties; in the abolition of slavery; in gradualism and moderation; in the reform of manners, morals and politics; in peace and internationalism; in social and economic progress with due respect for national and regional assumptions; in justice and the rule of law; in freedom of opinion and association; in the balancing of the powers of government and the division of political authority between different organizations of government being a weapon against despotic rule by individuals, groups or majorities; in social equality although not to the extent that it endangered liberty, and particularly Enlightenment trusted in liberty under an enlightened process of law so as liberty would not disrupt the organised functions of government.⁷

In the seventeenth century, the Scientific Revolution had provided a different model for how problems might be resolved by using rational thought and experimentation, instead of on the authority of religion or the ancients. Actually, the French philosopher, mathematician and scientist René Descartes had found man's ability to reason like the very proof of his existence, stating 'I think, therefore I am', in his Discourse on Method in 1637.⁸ Descartes discarded all sorts of intellectual authority except the conclusions of his own thought, which he then used to prove the existence of God. The Scientific Revolution had actually established in the mid-16th century with Copernicus' new theory of the sun as the centre of the universe, replacing Ptolemy's earth-centred model, acknowledged since antiquity. This revolution culminated in the seventeenth century with the publication of Sir Isaac Newton's Principia in 1687, wherein a perfectly mechanical universe was described through universal laws of motion. Newton, like Descartes, introduced a vision of the universe whose most basic workings could be calculated and understood rationally, however that was also the work of a Creator. The triumph of Newtonian science coincided with and assisted to provide a fundamental intellectual change.⁹

By the beginning of eighteenth century, the emphasis of speculation was shifting from theological to secular issues. This change is at once apparent whenever we evaluate two rulers who emphasize the old and new outlooks. Louis XIV of France was a typical seventeenth-century sovereign, in this he had seen his prime responsibility to the State as a religious pioneer. His revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which enforced tens of thousands of Protestants to flee France, was an illustration of his concern with the religious unity of his country. In comparison, the eighteenth-century ruler Frederick the Great of Prussia

was basically a secular leader. He explained his own function as that of first servant of the state.¹⁰ To Frederick; his subject's religions were their own affair, a matter of private conscience, and not a public matter of state. Frederick's overriding priority preferably was with building an army and a stable bureaucracy, and putting in place a tax structure to fund them. His rationally sorted state system might ensure the security and prosperity of his individuals. The old religious hostilities that had separated Europe since the Reformation definitely not preoccupied him. Science and rational inquiry nowadays came to be viewed as the common ground which reconciled men earlier polarized into Catholic or Protestant, in what the Declaration of Independence would call the pursuit of happiness to be achieved in this world, not the next. Reason provided a unifying doctrine and the way of increasing human happiness, taking over the position once held by religion. With the appropriate use of reason, all society's problems could be resolved, and all mankind could live prosperously and contentedly.¹¹

Four primary transitions through Enlightenment

Four areas where fundamental change developed were:

- **Religious**
 - Questioning of Catholic perception and Protestantism led to tolerance for new ideas.
- **Intellectual**
 - Free intellectual inquiry resulted from widespread opposition to religious intolerance.
 - The French Revolution led to the 'Age of Reason'.
 - Educational institutions free of religious allegiance also spread.
- **Economic**
 - Industrial Revolution, moving away from agrarian fiefdoms, led to an increasingly wealthy, independent and educated middle class.
- **Political**
 - Nation-states emerged, ruled by kings and parliaments that only paid lip service to religious rule.
 - Parties and factions that have legitimate differences of opinion.¹²

In England, the seminal political theories of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke were in the spirit of the identical rational method to problem solving, however had also been influenced by the intense challenges that unfolded in Britain between the 1640s and the 1680s. Hobbes described in his masterwork, the *Leviathan* (1651) that people were motivated particularly by the desire for power and by fear of other men, and so important an all-powerful sovereign to rule over them. He characterised their lives without a strong ruler like solitary, nasty, poor, brutish, and short. For Hobbes, the English Civil War, which started in 1642, and finished with the execution of King Charles I in 1649, was convincing evidence that peoples were inevitably selfish and competitive. Furthermore, Galileo's concept regarding the nature of the physical world, encouraged him to reason that only matter exists, so that human behaviour might be predicted by specific, scientific laws. In the *Leviathan*, he endeavoured to transform politics into a science, wherein the clash of competing material bodies (men), could be predicted with mathematical accuracy and thus regulated.¹³

Enlightenment era religious commentary was a response to the preceding century of religious conflict in Europe, especially the Thirty Years' War.¹⁴ Theologians of the Enlightenment wanted to reform their faith to its primarily non-confrontational roots and to limit the capacity for religious controversy to spill over into politics and warfare while still maintaining a true faith in God. For moderate Christians, this meant a return to simple Scripture. John Locke rejected the corpus of theological comments in favour of an

"unprejudiced examination" of the Word of God alone. He established the essence of Christianity to be a faith in Christ the redeemer and recommended avoiding more descriptive debate.¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson, in the Jefferson Bible, went further; he dropped any passages dealing with miracles, visitations of angels, and the resurrection of Jesus after his death. He tried to extract the practical Christian moral code of the New Testament.¹⁶

John Locke, one of the most important Enlightenment thinkers,¹⁷ focused his governance theory in social contract theory, a subject that permeated Enlightenment political thought. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes ushered in this new debate with his work *Leviathan* in 1651. Hobbes as well developed some of the principles of European liberal thought: the right of the individual; the natural equality of all men; the artificial nature of the political order (which led to the later difference between civil society and the state); the view that all legitimate political power must be "representative" and based on the consent of the people; and a liberal interpretation of law which leaves people free to do whatever the law does not explicitly forbid.¹⁸ The improvement of the world's institutions and the improvement of its inhabitants would have to proceed collectively.

The "Radical Enlightenment"¹⁹ proclaimed the notion of separating church and state,²⁰ a concept that generally recognized to English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704).²¹ As outlined by his theory of the social contract, Locke asserted that the government lacked power in the realm of individual conscience, since this was something rational people could not cede to the government for it or others to control. For Locke, this created a natural right in the liberty of conscience, which he said must therefore remain protected from any government authority.

Locke had asserted that at birth the mind was a blank sheet (*tabula rasa*) waiting to receive the impression of the outside world; however this was a very double-edged psychological doctrine for believers in human progress. At one level the doctrine of the *tabula rasa* could give rise to significant optimism.²² When the mind received the right impressions from a benevolent world then the mind itself would be benevolent. There were no innate approaches to complicate issues and also definitely no trace of that original sinfulness upon which the repressive establishment of the social world relied so much for their basic justification. On the contrary, the *tabula rasa* theory of mind was a disturbingly passive theory. Enlightenment's perspective of human nature was hence optimistic and pessimistic simultaneously. In substance, it could not differ too much from the old Christian view that human life was lived between the polarities of good and evil, apart from that Enlightenment offered a very distinct explanation of just how good and evil 'got there'.

Both Locke and Rousseau created social contract theories in *Two Treatises of Government* and *Discourse on Inequality*, respectively. Although quite different works, Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau agreed that a social contract, wherein the government's authority exists in the consent of the governed,²³ is important for individual to live in civil society. Both Rousseau and Locke's social contract theories rest on the presupposition of natural rights, which are not a result of law or custom, but are things that all men have in pre-political societies, and are therefore universal and inalienable. The most famous natural right formulation originates from John Locke in his *Second Treatise*, while he presented the state of nature. For Locke the law of nature is grounded on mutual security, or the concept that one cannot infringe on another's natural rights, as every man is equal and has the same inalienable rights. These natural rights include perfect equality and freedom, and the right to preserve life and property. Locke also argued against slavery on the basis that enslaving yourself goes against the law of nature; you cannot surrender your own personal rights, your freedom is absolute and no one can take it from you. Furthermore, Locke says that particular

person cannot enslave another because it is morally reprehensible, though he introduces a caveat by saying that enslavement of a lawful captive in time of war would not go against one's natural rights.²⁴

Jean Jacques Rousseau had a double relationship with the Enlightenment Movement. On the one hand, an illustration, Kant described Enlightenment like 'the exist out of the humans' adolescence which they had imposed upon themselves. This definition is the one in a wider sense. Within this perception, Rousseau was amongst the Enlightenment philosophers. Nevertheless, in its narrower sense, on the other hand, the Enlightenment signifies the basically blind faith in the almightiness of human Reason. In this sense, Rousseau was against the Enlightenment in that Rousseau rejected the tyranny of Reason and advocated the return to nature and the revival of inner feeling. Rousseau occupied a very unique position in the history of philosophy in the 18th century: On the one hand, Rousseau was a creation of the 18th century Europe in that Rousseau with trust in the human dignity and intelligence was the philosophical father of the French Revolution. Its motto was to return to nature, regaining the natural rights of "liberty, equality and fraternity."²⁵ Rousseau was the successor of the non-rational practice of Pascal through which the way of thinking alternative to rationalism was formulated in curving the power of the European Reason. Rousseau was born in Geneva in a protestant family (he was threatened by the catholic and later on converted to Catholicism, but) and was consistently threatened by the prosecution phobia. E.g., Hume helped to identified Rousseau a job, which he could not kept and fled for France again. Rousseau sought many different occupations, but yet he never kept any for any period of time worth mentioning. As he was in Paris, he got acquainted with Diderot and contributed to Encyclopedia. Rousseau was 37 years of age. Rejecting the culture of Reason which the Encyclopaedist's advocated, Jean Jacques Rousseau mentioned that we must return to Nature. The nature here stipulated is the nature without corruption, the nature of naivety, the purity of the natural humans.²⁶

Also, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who mentioned 'Dare to know!' (Sapere aude!) as the motto of the Enlightenment, it ended up criticising the Enlightenment's confidence in the power of reason. Criticism of the Enlightenment has expressed itself in many different forms, such as religious conservatism, postmodernism, and feminism. Immanuel Kant first posed it in 1784.²⁷ As emphasized by Kant, the Age of Enlightenment, which lasted from roughly the late 17th century up to the starting of the 19th century, was humanity's growth into intellectual maturity. Kant and others claimed that, through scientific inquiry and an emphasis on reasoned discussion, mankind was definitely able to believe for itself rather than appealing to the authority of the Church, Greek philosophers, or other sources of supposedly revealed truths. According to Kant, "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one understands without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another."²⁸

According to Immanuel Kant, enlightenment was man's release from "self-incurred tutelage." He wants the public to think freely, act judiciously and be "treated in accordance with their dignity" Kant says that tutelage occurred because of many reasons-

- The first was laziness. The first was laziness. Men thought it cumbersome to reason and enlarge their knowledge. Simple obedience was less onerous to their simple minds.
- Kant explains that the second reason, cowardice, supplemented their laziness. The general public feared using their reason because they were not willing to venture into uncharted waters. They were afraid to have a few falls in the process of learning how to walk.

- The third reason he argued was that the select few who were smarter put themselves on top by depriving the general public of knowledge and education.
- The final reason Kant gives for tutelage is complacency and blind obedience. The people were smug in their shackles of centuries-old serfdom. Like “domestic cattle”, they obeyed without bothering to challenge the norm or person to alleviate their suffering.²⁹

For any single individual to work him out of the life under tutelage which has become almost his nature is very difficult. He has come to be fond of his state, and he is, for the present, really incapable of making use of his reason, for no one has ever let him try it out. Statutes and formulas, those mechanical tools of the rational employment or rather misemployment of his natural gifts, are the fetters of an everlasting tutelage. Whoever throws them off makes only an uncertain leap over the narrowest ditch because he is not accustomed to that kind of free motion. Therefore, few have succeeded by their own exercise of mind, both in freeing themselves from incompetence and in achieving a steady pace.³⁰

But that the public should enlighten itself is more possible; indeed, if only freedom is granted, enlightenment is almost sure to follow. For there will always be some independent thinkers, even among the established guardians of the great masses, who, after throwing off the yoke of tutelage from their own shoulders, will disseminate the spirit of the rational appreciation of both their own worth and every man's vocation for thinking for himself. But be it noted that the public, which has first been brought under this yoke by their guardians, forces the guardians themselves to remain bound when it is incited to do so by some of the guardians who are themselves capable of some enlightenment - so harmful is it to implant prejudices, for they later take vengeance on their cultivators or on their descendants. Thus, the public can only slowly attain enlightenment. Perhaps a fall of personal despotism or of avaricious or tyrannical oppression may be accomplished by revolution, but never a true reform in ways of thinking. Farther, new prejudices will serve as well as old ones to harness the great unthinking masses.³¹

Kant presents the requirements for enlightenment. The foremost requirement is freedom. He believes that freedom to express one honestly is paramount for enlightenment. This is important because when a man is allowed to freely express his thoughts and opinions without penalization, he will offer ideas without fear and restriction. It is the freedom to make public use of one's reason at every point. But I hear on all sides, "Do not argue!" The Officer says: "Do not argue but drill!" The tax collector: "Do not argue but pay!" The cleric: "Do not argue but believe!" Only one prince in the world says, "Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey!" Everywhere there is restriction on freedom.³²

A greater degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people's spiritual freedom; yet the former established impassable boundaries for the latter; conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom provides enough room for all fully to expand their abilities. Thus, once nature has removed the hard shell from this kernel for which she has most fondly cared, namely, the inclination to and vocation for free thinking, the kernel gradually reacts on a people's mentality (whereby they become increasingly able to act freely), and it finally even influences the principles of government, which finds that it can profit by treating men, who are now more than machines, in accord with their dignity.³³

Kant's second point is the leaders must be enlightened first for the public to be enlightened. Until the monarch is enlightened, he will not grant his subjects the necessary freedom to think without considering opposing viewpoints as an act of insubordination. He makes a bold statement about monarchism when he says, “his law-giving authority rests on his uniting the general public will in his own” He is actually saying the monarch's commands and wishes should be a representation of the people and their interests. He emphasises that a republican government should comply with the wishes of its citizens and not force them

into blind and foolish obedience. He strongly expresses the need for a government that does not intimidate its citizens, but rather encourages them.³⁴

Features of Enlightenment

1. Based on the 17th-century Age of Science and Reason

Many salient characteristics of the Enlightenment was the spirit was based upon the scientific and intellectual innovation of the 17th century. In fact ISSAC Newton's Laws of Motion, F. Bacon's perception of Scientific Approach, René Descartes Idea of Reason, John Locke's Theory of Natural Right and Natural Law, Baruch Spinoza's Political Concepts, furthermore, the Scientific Theories of W. Harvey and Halley, virtually all are combining to lay the basic foundation of the 18th century Enlightenment. History has never known of a period so sceptical towards tradition, thus dedicated to the power of reason and science, and so convinced of the harmony of nature and inevitability of progress.³⁵

2. Rejection of Superstition, Magic, Miracle and Witchcraft

One more remarkable attribute of the Enlightenment was the disbelief in and discouragement of superstition, miracles, witchcraft and magic. That was undoubtedly the consequence of materialist and scientific thinking. The individuals in the Age of Enlightenment did not merely cease to fear the devil as well as God. God was taken much more like the creator of the Universe than as the Father and Divine Providence. God was compared to a watchmaker and the universe as a watch. The Universe is as complex and intricate as a watch. As a watch cannot exist without a watchmaker, so the universe can't exist without god. The Newtonian prospect of mathematical law and accuracy was prominent in the perspectives of Enlightenment scholars.

3. Spirit of Secularism

An essential characteristic along with the accomplishment of the Enlightenment was the spirit of Secularism. Religious orthodoxy started to decline as a result of newly emerging rationalism. Churches and churchmen gradually lost out in prestige and leadership. Politics, economy and trade were no longer subject to religious ends. The religious bondage was discarded off.³⁶

4. Concept of Mechanistic Universe

The Philosophes School of thinkers' perception that the entire universe is like a machine. A machine consists of various parts and accessories and all these work in co-ordination based upon scientific concepts. Likewise, the universe, which contains numerous galaxies and planets including our own earth, as well operate as per specific rules of science. The birth, movement and destruction of planets are as stated by the laws of science. In other words, the universe is mechanistic in nature. The Enlightenment scholars, being admirers of science and reason, rightly clung to this view. It might emerge that they did not believe in God, but the fact is they did not outright deny God; however, they gave a secondary role to God. As already mentioned. He is actually basically a watch mechanic rectifying the fault in nature as the mechanic does in the case of a defective watch.

5. Principle of Empirical Knowledge

The philosophus intellectuals highly respected the principle of empirical knowledge. This is exactly an extremely profound concept and its significance is increasing with every passing century. It means that the truth has to be sought after thorough exploration and research. To begin with important information has to be explored from all possible sources. This is the stage recognised for a comprehensive number of facts and figures. In the second stage the collected particulars must be categorised and analysed. In the last stage the reality should be introduced forth in the light of the analysis and assessment of collected

material. The last stage is the most essential because the researcher has to arrive at truth without any bias or prejudice. The prospect of accomplishing truth is a lot more rigorous in the instance of science. The fact has to be reached after methodical study and analysis. An inadequate practice will not lead to universal truth. The principle has been a valuable and enduring legacy of the Age of Enlightenment.³⁷

6. Idea of Advancement

Yet another astounding attribute of the Enlightenment was the abiding belief in the concept of development. It is often asserted that the notion of progress was the dominating idea of European civilisation from 17th century to early 20th century. It observed an offensive surprise while in World War I and was shattered to pieces by the World War II. The concept implies that human society, with the accumulation of even more understanding of itself and the universe will certainly improve and ennoble itself. Man's innovation and development would follow a linear method. Each and every generation with the acquisition of great knowledge and experience could be much better, more sensible, wiser and more successful compared to its earlier generation. In the 17th century, in England and France, the dispute between the Ancients and Modernists had already reflected the coming of the idea of progress. The Ancients believed that the classical literature was the way to obtain knowledge and wisdom and that there was clearly nothing else to identify than what the ancient Greeks and Romans has stated. The Modernists, however, refer to the vast repository of knowledge contributed by science and technology, by art and literature. They rationalised that modern people are not only the best of the past, but also understand a lot by unravelling the mystery of nature through experiments and perception.

Conclusion

The Enlightenment represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of modern political thought, fundamentally altering perceptions of authority, freedom, and political legitimacy. Thinkers of this era placed reason, individual rights, and the concept of consent at the forefront of political theory, challenging longstanding notions of absolutist governance and divine-right monarchy. The ideals of liberty, equality, and the social contract emerged as crucial elements that questioned traditional hierarchies and redefined the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu made significant contributions to this transformative period. Locke introduced the concept of natural rights and limited government, positing that political authority derives from the consent of the governed and must protect individual freedoms. Rousseau advanced the notion of popular sovereignty, emphasising the "general will" as the foundation of legitimate political order. Montesquieu's principle of separation of powers established a framework to prevent tyranny and maintain political equilibrium. Collectively, these ideas laid the groundwork for contemporary constitutional democracies and profoundly influenced landmark political movements, including the American and French Revolutions.

Nevertheless, a retrospective examination of Enlightenment political thought reveals certain limitations and tensions within this tradition. While Enlightenment thinkers championed universal principles of freedom and equality, the practical application of these ideals was often selective and incomplete. Issues such as colonial domination, social inequality, and the exclusion of specific groups from political participation highlight the contradictions between Enlightenment ideals and the realities of political life. Recognizing these limitations does not diminish the significance of Enlightenment thought; rather, it fosters a more nuanced and critical engagement with its legacy.

In contemporary political discourse, the concepts of liberty, equality, and the social contract continue to shape discussions surrounding democracy, governance, and justice. Modern political systems remain anchored in the Enlightenment principle that legitimate authority must be accountable to the populace and grounded in rational, justifiable norms. By revisiting and critically reassessing these foundational ideas, scholars can attain a deeper understanding of both the achievements and the unfinished aspirations of the Enlightenment project. Ultimately, the enduring relevance of Enlightenment political thinking lies in its capacity to inspire ongoing reflection on what is essential for establishing a just, free, and equitable political order.

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