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Modern & Postmodern Thought

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Introduction

The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Enlightenment, was a philosophical movement that dominated the world of ideas in Europe in the 18th century. It was centered around the idea that reason is the primary source of authority and legitimacy, and it advocated such ideals as liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state. The Enlightenment was marked by an emphasis on the scientific method and reductionism, along with increased questioning of religious orthodoxy. The ideas of the Enlightenment undermined the authority of the monarchy and the church, and paved the way for the political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. French historians traditionally place the Enlightenment between 1715, the year that Louis XIV died, and 1789, the beginning of the French Revolution. Some recent historians begin the period in the 1620s, with the start of the scientific revolution. However, different national varieties of the movement flourished between the first decades of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century.

The ideas of the Enlightenment played a major role in inspiring the French Revolution, which began in 1789 and emphasized the rights of the common men, as opposed to the exclusive rights of the elites. However, historians of race, gender, and class note that Enlightenment ideals were not originally envisioned as universal in the today's sense of the word. Although they did eventually inspire the struggle for rights of people of color, women, or the working masses, most Enlightenment thinkers did not advocate equality for all, regardless of race, gender, or class, but rather insisted that rights and freedoms were not hereditary. This perspective directly attacked the traditionally exclusive position of the European aristocracy, but was still largely limited to expanding the political and individual rights of white males of particular social standing.

Philosophy

In the mid-18th century, Europe witnessed an explosion of philosophic and scientific activity that challenged traditional doctrines and dogmas. The philosophic movement was led by Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued for a society based upon reason rather than faith and Catholic doctrine, for a new civil order based on natural law, and for science based on experiments and observation. The political philosopher Montesquieu introduced the idea of a separation of powers in a government, a concept which was enthusiastically adopted by the authors of the United States Constitution. While the philosophers of the French Enlightenment were not revolutionaries, and many were members of the nobility, their ideas

played an important part in undermining the legitimacy of the Old Regime and shaping the French Revolution.

There were two distinct lines of Enlightenment thought: the radical enlightenment, inspired by the philosophy of Spinoza, advocating democracy, individual liberty, freedom of expression, and eradication of religious authority. A second, more moderate variety, supported by René Descartes, John Locke, Christian Wolff, Isaac Newton and others, sought accommodation between reform and the traditional systems of power and faith.

Much of what is incorporated in the scientific method (the nature of knowledge, evidence, experience, and causation), and some modern attitudes towards the relationship between science and religion, were developed by David Hume and Adam Smith. Hume became a major figure in the skeptical philosophical and empiricist traditions of philosophy. Immanuel Kant tried to reconcile rationalism and religious belief, individual freedom and political authority, as well as map out a view of the public sphere through private and public reason. Kant's work continued to shape German thought, and indeed all of European philosophy, well into the 20th century. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of England's earliest feminist philosophers. She argued for a society based on reason, and that women, as well as men, should be treated as rational beings.

Science

While the Enlightenment cannot be pigeonholed into a specific doctrine or set of dogmas, science came to play a leading role in Enlightenment discourse and thought. Many Enlightenment writers and thinkers had backgrounds in the sciences, and associated scientific advancement with the overthrow of religion and traditional authority in favor of the development of free speech and thought. Broadly speaking, Enlightenment science greatly valued empiricism and rational thought, and was embedded with the Enlightenment ideal of advancement and progress. As with most Enlightenment views, the benefits of science were not seen universally.

Science during the Enlightenment was dominated by scientific societies and academies, which had largely replaced universities as centers of scientific research and development. Societies and academies were also the backbone of the maturation of the scientific profession. Another important development was the popularization of science among an increasingly literate population. Many scientific theories reached the wide public, notably through the *Encyclopédie* (a general encyclopedia published in France between 1751 and 1772) and the popularization of Newtonianism.

The 18th century saw significant advancements in the practice of medicine, mathematics, and physics; the development of biological taxonomy; a new understanding of magnetism and electricity; and the maturation of chemistry as a discipline, which established the foundations of modern chemistry.

Modern Western Government

The Enlightenment has long been hailed as the foundation of modern western political and intellectual culture. It brought political modernization to the west, in terms of focusing on democratic values and institutions, and the creation of modern, liberal democracies.

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes ushered in a new debate on government with his work *Leviathan* in 1651. Hobbes also developed some of the fundamentals of European liberal thought: the right of the individual; the natural equality of all men; the artificial character of the political order (which led to the later distinction 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.

John Locke and Rousseau also developed social contract theories. While differing in details, Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau agreed that a social contract, in which the government’s authority lies in the consent of the governed, is necessary for man to live in civil society. Locke is particularly known for his statement that individuals have a right to “Life, Liberty and Property,” and his belief that the natural right to property is derived from labor. His theory of natural rights has influenced many political documents, including the United States Declaration of Independence and the French National Constituent Assembly’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Though much of Enlightenment’s political thought was dominated by social contract theorists, some Scottish philosophers, most notably David Hume and Adam Ferguson, criticized this camp. Theirs was the assumption that governments derived from a ruler’s authority and force (Hume) and politics grew out of social development rather than social contract (Ferguson).

Religion

Enlightenment era religious commentary was a response to the preceding century of religious conflict in Europe. Enlightenment thinkers sought to curtail the political power of organized religion, and thereby prevent another age of intolerant religious war. A number of novel ideas developed, including Deism (belief in God the Creator, with no reference to the Bible or any other source) and atheism. The latter was much discussed but there were few proponents. Many, like Voltaire, held that without belief in a God who punishes evil, the moral order of society was undermined.

The radical Enlightenment promoted the concept of separating church and state, an idea often credited to Locke. According to Locke’s principle of the social contract, the government lacked authority in the realm of individual conscience, as 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. These views on religious tolerance and the importance of individual conscience, along with the social contract, became particularly influential in the American colonies and the drafting of the United States Constitution.

Rationalism

Rationalism, or a belief that we come to knowledge through the use of logic, and thus independently of sensory experience, was critical to the debates of the Enlightenment period, when most philosophers lauded the power of reason but insisted that knowledge comes from experience.

Key Points :

- Rationalism —as an appeal to human reason as a way of obtaining knowledge—has a philosophical history dating from antiquity. While rationalism did not dominate the Enlightenment, it laid critical basis for the debates that developed over the course of the 18th century.
- René Descartes (1596-1650), the first of the modern rationalists, laid the groundwork for debates developed during the Enlightenment. He thought that the knowledge of eternal truths could be attained by reason alone (no experience was necessary).
- Since the Enlightenment, rationalism is usually associated with the introduction of mathematical methods into philosophy as seen in the works of Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza. This is commonly called continental rationalism, because it was predominant in the continental schools of Europe, whereas in Britain empiricism dominated.
- Both Spinoza and Leibniz asserted that, in principle, all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, could be gained through the use of reason alone, though they both observed that this was not possible in practice for human beings, except in specific areas, such as mathematics.
- While empiricism (a theory that knowledge comes only or primarily from a sensory experience) dominated the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, attempted to combine the principles of empiricism and rationalism. He concluded that both reason and experience are necessary for human knowledge.
- Since the Enlightenment, rationalism in politics historically emphasized a “politics of reason” centered upon rational choice, utilitarianism, and secularism.

Key Terms :

- **metaphysics:** A traditional branch of philosophy concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of being and the world that encompasses it, although the term is not easily defined. Traditionally, it attempts to answer two basic questions in the broadest possible terms: “Ultimately, what is there?” and “What is it like?”
- **empiricism:** A theory that states that knowledge comes only, or primarily, from sensory experience. One of several views of epistemology, the study of human knowledge, along with rationalism and skepticism, it emphasizes the role of

experience and evidence, especially sensory experience, in the formation of ideas over the notion of innate ideas or traditions.

- **cogito ergo sum:** A Latin philosophical proposition by René Descartes, the first modern rationalist, usually translated into English as “I think, therefore I am.” This proposition became a fundamental element of western philosophy, as it purported to form a secure foundation for knowledge in the face of radical doubt. Descartes asserted that the very act of doubting one’s own existence served, at minimum, as proof of the reality of one’s own mind.

Introduction

Rationalism—as an appeal to human reason as a way of obtaining knowledge—has a philosophical history dating from antiquity. While rationalism, as the view that reason is the main source of knowledge, did not dominate the Enlightenment, it laid critical basis for the debates that developed over the course of the 18th century. As the Enlightenment centered on reason as the primary source of authority and legitimacy, many philosophers of the period drew from earlier philosophical contributions, most notably those of René Descartes (1596-1650), a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. Descartes was the first of the modern rationalists. He thought that only knowledge of eternal truths (including the truths of mathematics and the foundations of the sciences) could be attained by reason alone, while the knowledge of physics required experience of the world, aided by the scientific method. He argued that reason alone determined knowledge, and that this could be done independently of the senses. For instance, his famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum*, or “I think, therefore I am,” is a conclusion reached *a priori* (i.e., prior to any kind of experience on the matter). The simple meaning is that doubting one’s existence, in and of itself, proves that an “I” exists to do the thinking.

Descartes laid the foundation for 17th-century continental rationalism, later advocated by Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz, and opposed by the empiricist school of thought consisting of Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Leibniz, Spinoza, and Descartes were all well-versed in mathematics, as well as philosophy, and Descartes and Leibniz contributed greatly to science as well.

Rationalism v. Empiricism

Since the Enlightenment, rationalism is usually associated with the introduction of mathematical methods into philosophy, as seen in the works of Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza. This is commonly called continental rationalism, because it was predominant in the continental schools of Europe, whereas in Britain, empiricism, or a theory that knowledge comes only or primarily from a sensory experience, dominated. Although rationalism and empiricism are traditionally seen as opposing each other, the distinction between rationalists and empiricists was drawn at a later period, and would not have been recognized by philosophers involved in Enlightenment debates. Furthermore, the distinction between the two philosophies is not as clear-cut as is sometimes suggested. For example, Descartes and

John Locke, one of the most important Enlightenment thinkers, have similar views about the nature of human ideas.

Proponents of some varieties of rationalism argue that, starting with foundational basic principles, like the axioms of geometry, one could deductively derive the rest of all possible knowledge. The philosophers who held this view most clearly were Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz, whose attempts to grapple with the epistemological and metaphysical problems raised by Descartes led to a development of the fundamental approach of rationalism. Both Spinoza and Leibniz asserted that, *in principle*, all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, could be gained through the use of reason alone, though they both observed that this was not possible *in practice* for human beings, except in specific areas, such as mathematics. On the other hand, Leibniz admitted in his book, *Monadology*, that “we are all mere Empirics in three fourths of our actions.”

Immanuel Kant

Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz are usually credited for laying the groundwork for the 18th-century Enlightenment. During the mature Enlightenment period, Immanuel Kant attempted to explain the relationship between reason and human experience, and to move beyond the failures of traditional philosophy and metaphysics. He wanted to put an end to an era of futile and speculative theories of human experience, and regarded himself as ending and showing the way beyond the impasse between rationalists and empiricists. He is widely held to have synthesized these two early modern traditions in his thought.

Kant named his brand of epistemology (theory of knowledge) “transcendental idealism,” and he first laid out these views in his famous work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. In it, he argued that there were fundamental problems with both rationalist and empiricist dogma. To the rationalists he argued, broadly, that pure reason is flawed when it goes beyond its limits and claims to know those things that are necessarily beyond the realm of all possible experience (e.g., the existence of God, free will, or the immortality of the human soul). To the empiricist, he argued that while it is correct that experience is fundamentally necessary for human knowledge, reason is necessary for processing that experience into coherent thought. He therefore concluded that both reason and experience are necessary for human knowledge. In the same way, Kant also argued that it was wrong to regard thought as mere analysis. In his views, *a priori* concepts do exist, but if they are to lead to the amplification of knowledge, they must be brought into relation with empirical data.

Politics

Since the Enlightenment, rationalism in politics historically emphasized a “politics of reason” centered upon rational choice, utilitarianism, and secularism (later, relationship between rationalism and religion was ameliorated by the adoption of pluralistic rationalist methods practicable regardless of religious or irreligious ideology). Some philosophers today, most

notably John Cottingham, note that rationalism, a methodology, became socially conflated with atheism, a worldview. Cottingham writes,

In the past, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, the term 'rationalist' was often used to refer to free thinkers of an anti-clerical and anti-religious outlook, and for a time the word acquired a distinctly pejorative force (...). The use of the label 'rationalist' to characterize a world outlook which has no place for the supernatural is becoming less popular today; terms like 'humanist' or 'materialist' seem largely to have taken its place. But the old usage still survives.

Natural Rights

Natural rights, understood as those that are not dependent on the laws, customs, or beliefs of any particular culture or government, (and therefore, universal and inalienable) were central to the debates during the Enlightenment on the relationship between the individual and the government.

Key Points :

- Natural rights are those that are not dependent on the laws, customs, or beliefs of any particular culture or government, and are therefore universal and inalienable (i.e., rights that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws). They are usually defined in opposition to legal rights, or those bestowed onto a person by a given legal system.
- Although natural rights have been discussed since antiquity, it was the philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment that developed the modern concept of natural rights, which has been critical to the modern republican government and civil society.
- During the Enlightenment, natural rights developed as part of the social contract theory. The theory addressed the questions of the origin of society and the legitimacy of the authority of the state over the individual.
- Thomas Hobbes' conception of natural rights extended from his conception of man in a "state of nature." He objected to the attempt to derive rights from "natural law," arguing that law ("lex") and right ("jus") though often confused, signify opposites, with law referring to obligations, while rights refers to the absence of obligations.
- The most famous natural right formulation comes from John Locke, who argued that the natural rights include perfect equality and freedom, and the right to preserve life and property. Other Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers that developed and complicated the concept of natural rights were John Lilburne, Francis Hutcheson, Georg Hegel, and Thomas Paine.
- The modern European anti-slavery movement drew heavily from the concept of natural rights that became central to the efforts of European abolitionists.

Key Terms :

- **Legal rights:** The rights bestowed onto a person by a given legal system (i.e., rights that can be modified, repealed, and restrained by human laws).
- **Natural rights:** The rights that are not dependent on the laws, customs, or beliefs of any particular culture or government, and are therefore universal and inalienable (i.e., rights that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws). Some, yet not all, see them as synonymous with human rights.
- **natural law:** A philosophy that certain rights or values are inherent by virtue of human nature, and can be universally understood through human reason. Historically, it refers to the use of reason to analyze both social and personal human nature in order to deduce binding rules of moral behavior. The law of nature, like nature itself, is universal.
- **social contract theory:** In moral and political philosophy, a theory or model originating during the Age of Enlightenment that typically addresses the questions of the origin of society and the legitimacy of the authority of the state over the individual. It typically posits that individuals have consented, either explicitly or tacitly, to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority of the ruler or magistrate (or to the decision of a majority), in exchange for protection of their remaining rights.

Natural Rights and Natural Law

Natural rights are usually juxtaposed with the concept of legal rights. Legal rights are those bestowed onto a person by a given legal system (i.e., rights that can be modified, repealed, and restrained by human laws). Natural rights are those that are not dependent on the laws, customs, or beliefs of any particular culture or government, and are therefore universal and inalienable (i.e., rights that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws). Natural rights are closely related to the concept of natural law (or laws). During the Enlightenment, the concept of natural laws was used to challenge the divine right of kings, and became an alternative justification for the establishment of a social contract, positive law, and government (and thus, legal rights) in the form of classical republicanism (built around concepts such as civil society, civic virtue, and mixed government). Conversely, the concept of natural rights is used by others to challenge the legitimacy of all such establishments.

The idea of natural rights is also closely related to that of human rights; some acknowledge no difference between the two, while others choose to keep the terms separate to eliminate association with some features traditionally associated with natural rights. Natural rights, in particular, are considered beyond the authority of any government or international body to dismiss.

Natural Rights and Social Contract

Although natural rights have been discussed since antiquity, it was the philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment that developed the modern concept of natural rights, which has been critical to the modern republican government and civil society.

At the time, natural rights developed as part of the social contract theory, which addressed the questions of the origin of society and the legitimacy of the authority of the state over the

individual. Social contract arguments typically posit that individuals have consented, either explicitly or tacitly, to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority of the ruler or magistrate (or to the decision of a majority), in exchange for protection of their remaining rights. The question of the relation between natural and legal rights, therefore, is often an aspect of social contract theory.

Thomas Hobbes' conception of natural rights extended from his conception of man in a "state of nature." He argued that the essential natural (human) right was "to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say, of his own Life." Hobbes sharply distinguished this natural "liberty" from natural "laws." In his natural state, according to Hobbes, man's life consisted entirely of liberties, and not at all of laws. He objected to the attempt to derive rights from "natural law," arguing that law ("lex") and right ("jus") though often confused, signify opposites, with law referring to obligations, while rights refer to the absence of obligations. Since by our (human) nature, we seek to maximize our well being, rights are prior to law, natural or institutional, and people will not follow the laws of nature without first being subjected to a sovereign power, without which all ideas of right and wrong are meaningless.

The most famous natural right formulation comes from John Locke in his *Second Treatise*, when he introduces the state of nature. For Locke, the law of nature is grounded on mutual security, or the idea 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. Such fundamental rights could not be surrendered in the social contract. Another 17th-century Englishman, John Lilburne (known as Freeborn John) argued for level human rights that he called "*freeborn rights*," which he defined as being rights that every human being is born with, as opposed to rights bestowed by government or by human law. The distinction between alienable and unalienable rights was introduced by Francis Hutcheson, who argued that "Unalienable Rights are essential Limitations in all Governments." In the German Enlightenment, Georg Hegel gave a highly developed treatment of the inalienability argument. Like Hutcheson, he based the theory of inalienable rights on the *de facto* inalienability of those aspects of personhood that distinguish persons from things. A thing, like a piece of property, can in fact be transferred from one person to another. According to Hegel, the same would not apply to those aspects that make one a person. Consequently, the question of whether property is an aspect of natural rights remains a matter of debate.

Thomas Paine further elaborated on natural rights in his influential work *Rights of Man* (1791), emphasizing that rights cannot be granted by any charter because this would legally imply they can also be revoked, and under such circumstances, they would be reduced to privileges. The most famous natural right formulation comes from John Locke in his *Second Treatise*. For Locke, the natural rights include perfect equality and freedom, and the right to preserve life and property.

Natural Rights, Slavery, and Abolitionism

In discussion of social contract theory, "inalienable rights" were those rights that could not be surrendered by citizens to the sovereign. Such rights were thought to be natural rights,

independent of positive law. Some social contract theorists reasoned, however, that in the natural state only the strongest could benefit from their rights. Thus, people form an implicit social contract, ceding their natural rights to the authority to protect the people from abuse, and living henceforth under the legal rights of that authority.

Many historical apologies for slavery and illiberal government were based on explicit or implicit voluntary contracts to alienate any natural rights to freedom and self-determination. Locke argued against slavery on the basis that enslaving yourself goes against the law of nature; you cannot surrender your own rights, your freedom is absolute and no one can take it from you. Additionally, Locke argues that one person cannot enslave another because it is morally reprehensible, although he introduces a caveat by saying that enslavement of a lawful captive in time of war would not go against one's natural rights. The *de facto* inalienability arguments of Hutcheson and his predecessors provided the basis for the anti-slavery movement to argue not simply against involuntary slavery but against any explicit or implied contractual forms of slavery. Any contract that tried to legally alienate such a right would be inherently invalid. Similarly, the argument was used by the democratic movement to argue against any explicit or implied social contracts of subjection by which a people would supposedly alienate their right of self-government to a sovereign.