

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The 18th century is often called the **Age of Enlightenment** or the **Age of Reason**. This was a time when thinkers began to challenge old ideas and traditions, using **reason**, **science**, and **evidence** to understand the world rather than simply accepting what they were told by religious or political authorities. It was a period of energy and change that had a significant influence on modern humanism.

Reason over tradition

Enlightenment thinkers believed people should use their reason to figure things out, rather than just accepting traditional beliefs. They encouraged critical thinking, asking: 'How do we know this is true?' and 'What evidence supports this idea?'

Religious questioning

While most people were still religious, some began to question organised religion and traditional religious teachings. Thinkers like David Hume wrote sceptically about miracles and religious claims. This didn't necessarily mean rejecting a god, but did lead to people thinking more critically about religious institutions and the power they had over people's lives.

Scientific thinking

The work of scientists like Isaac Newton (who explained gravity and motion) showed that the natural world could be understood through observation and mathematics. This scientific approach began to be applied to human society and politics too.

Individual rights and freedoms

Enlightenment thinkers began to argue that all people had natural rights and emphasised the value and dignity of every person. They questioned whether kings really had a 'divine right' to rule, and ideas about democracy, freedom of speech, and religious tolerance began to spread.



Francis Williams by unknown artist, c. 1760 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

This portrait of Jamaican scholar and poet Francis Williams (c. 1690–1762) shows him surrounded by symbols of learning and exploration, including a book by Isaac Newton.

The Enlightenment was not a single movement with agreed-upon beliefs, but a collection of new ways of thinking that challenged traditional authority and emphasised human reason, dignity, and potential.

In its growing emphasis on human reason, human rights, and a scientific approach, the Enlightenment laid crucial groundwork for modern humanism.

SOME IMPORTANT FIGURES

Ephraim Chambers (1680-1740)

Ephraim Chambers' was a writer and freethinker, driven by his belief that knowledge could improve humanity. His *Cyclopaedia* (1728) was a groundbreaking encyclopedia that embodied Enlightenment ideals through its systematic classification of knowledge. His work advocated **religious tolerance** and **freedom of thought**, while promoting a scientific, evidence-based understanding of the world.

David Hume (1711-1776)

David Hume was a leading figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, and one of the most influential critics of religion in his era. Hume's ideas challenged religious authority, questioned the possibility of miracles, and argued that **morality stemmed from human nature** rather than divine command. His writings emphasised the importance of evidence over faith and rational inquiry over supernatural explanations.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

Mary Wollstonecraft was a pioneering philosopher and the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which argued for women's right to education.

She believed that a person 'cannot be considered rational or virtuous who obeys any authority but that of reason.' Wollstonecraft's emphasis on **education**, equality, and reason-based morality profoundly influenced later generations of freethinkers, feminists, and humanists, and showed how Enlightenment ideas about **human rights** should apply to everyone.



Mary Wollstonecraft by John Opie, c. 1797 © National Portrait Gallery, London

1. What comparisons can you see between the ideas of the Enlightenment and modern humanist thinking?
2. How might your life be different if Enlightenment ideas about science, education, and human rights had never developed?
3. Can you see any of the ideas of the Enlightenment being applied to solve social problems today?



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