

Influential thinkers in enlightenment



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The most significant development in the 18th century was intellectual progress, known as the Enlightenment. It is a thought movement which gathered various conceptions of god, nature and human beings to a kind of world outlook. Many people approve it. The movement caused revolution changes in art, philosophy and politics. It also advocated reason, suspected church authorities and Feudalism. The ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers had a deeply impact on the European and the Euro-American societies.

The most important factor of the Enlightenment was the scientific revolution. Between the 17th century and the 18th century, based on direct observation and mathematical reasoning, astronomers and physicists saw the earth and the universe in a new vision. Relying on observation and mathematics, scholars transformed the natural science in a process which is known as the scientific revolution.

Some astronomers and mathematicians also made contribution to the revolution. Ptolemy wrote a book known as the “ Almagest” that combined opinions about the universe. He thought that the earth was at its centre. However, in 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus published a treatise “ On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres” that broke with Ptolemaic theory and argued that the sun stood at the centre of the universe. Kepler demonstrated that planetary orbits are elliptical. Gailleo who invented the telescope used it to view the universe. He popularized the idea that the universe is rational and subject to the laws of mathematics (Bentley, 2002).

Another powerful figure was Isaac Newton who culminated the new approach to science. He combined mathematical modeling and scientific observation

to derive his famous laws of motion and theory of universal gravitation. Newton's vision of the universe was so powerful and persuasive that its influence extended well beyond science. His work suggested that rational analysis of human behavior and institutions could lead to fresh insights about the human as well as the natural world (Bentley, 2002).

Inspired and supported by three innovative astronomers, physicists and mathematicians. European and Euro-American thinkers started an ambitious project to transform all human thought. They abandoned Aristotelian philosophy, Christian religion, and other traditionally recognized authorities, and they began to analyze the world where they live in a rational way. Enlightenment thinkers sought to discover natural laws that governed human society. John Lock, the English philosopher, is the founder of empiricis. He sought to identify the principles of psychology and argued that all human knowledge comes from sense perceptions. He threw away Rene Descartes's innate ideas and argued that experience offered spiritual conception to human's heart. He believed the world is consisted of material. His empiricism was continuously developed by later people and became the European main philosophy trend. In politics, he held constitutional monarchy and natural right which includes life, freedom and property right. Between 1689 and 1690 he wrote the most important political treatises " The Government". In the first treatise, he disproved Filmer's idea that god conferred the monarch authority. In the second treatise, he advocated the ruler's authorities should be agreed by the ruled and the only purpose of building country is protecting the security and people's right. When the

government went against the purpose, people have the right to take back the authority by taking action (John Locke, 2010).

The Scottish philosopher Adam Smith devoted special thought to the nature of early capitalist society and the principles that made it work. In 1776 he published a lengthy book *An inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, a wide-ranging work that uphold free, unregulated markets and capitalist corporation as the main factor of prosperity. The source of Smith's optimism about capitalism is his conviction that society as a whole benefits when individuals pursue their own economic interests and trade on a free market (Bentley, 2002).

France , the center of the Enlightenment, produced many prominent intellectuals known as philosophes who advanced the cause of reason. For example, the French nobleman Charles Louis sought to establish a science of politics and discover principles that would promote political liberty in a prosperous and stable state.

Different from philophers, philosophes addressed their works more to the educated public than to scholars. Instead of formal philosophical treatises, they mostly composed histories, novels, dramas, satires, and pamphlets on religious, moral, and political issues.

The leader of the Enlightenment is Voltaire who is a philosophe, a writer and a philosopher. Voltaire championed individual freedom and attacked oppressive policies with encouraged witty remark and intense irony. He held nature right and thought that people are equal in nature and before the law. He also waged a long literary campaign against the Roman Catholic church,
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which he is in the charge of crazy, intolerance and incalculable human suffering. He considered that the church is a factor of oppression (Voltaire, 2010).

As the earlier famous philosophe, Hobbes created machine materialism. He thought that the universe consisted of all the moving extension object. He tried hard to explain human's emotion and desire by the principle of mechanical motion. His moral thought includes "natural rights" and "natural laws". The former one means that human's natural character is egoism. The latter means that human's reason rules morality. He disproved the idea that god confers the authority to rulers. He advocated absolute monarchy. He also considered that society had to follow the general will (Hobbes, 2010).

As one of the representative of the Enlightenment, Rousseau is a radical who made the most fierce and severe criticize on French feudal society. His ideological essence and basic principle is sovereignty of the people. He considered that all rights belongs to people, government and officials are appointed by people, people have the right to appoint the government, people have the right to replace them, even have the right to revolt in order to abolish rulers who oppress people. He also thought that citizens should observe the law because it is free behaviour. In education, he proposed the idea "return to nature" that let children's body freely develop (Rousseau, 2010).

Although Enlightenment thinkers reached common ground on the excellence and the effect of human's reason, yet they hold different opinions on

detailed issues in politics, religion, philosophy and so on. In politics, Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire and Hobbes all supported with “ natural rights”. Locke and Hobbes’s “ nature rights” includes life right, freedom right and property right, they thought that people have the right to gain legal property; however, Voltaire thought that the unequal property right can not be avoided and Hobbes thought that “ natural rights” is egoism. Locke and Hobbes both objected to “ innate ideas” and Voltaire and Rousseau both approved with “ innate ideas”. Locke and Rousseau advocated “ revolutionary legitimacy”. But Hobbes insisted on the opinion that people must obey if the ruler was conferred authority. Locke, Voltaire and Rousseau all advocated freedom and equality. Rousseau considered that the law is very important, people should accept it. Hobbes and Voltaire did not agree with division of power. Voltaire thought that ruler’s power came from the ruled, the only purpose of building country is protecting the security and people’s right, when the government went against the purpose, people have the right to take back the authority by taking action. But Locke advocated distribution of power. Locke, Rousseau and Hobbes all advocated social contract. Rousseau considered private ownership is the source of unequal state. In philosophy, Locke and Voltaire both admitted the idea that the world is consisted of material. Rousseau and Voltaire both considered that knowledge rose from experience. Locke thought people’s heart was just like a paper and experience offered mind conception to it. Hobbes considered that material can not be separated from idea and material did not rely on our thought. In religion, Voltaire and Rousseau are both deist. Voltaire and Hobbes both disproved religion, they thought religion is requisite to maintain social order.

The ideas of these Enlightenment thinkers made a lot of contribution to the community. What worth being mentioned is that their ideas not only exert great influence on the scholars, but also affect the European political world, including the most influential figures at that that time such as Napoleon and Queen Catherine. Influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, Napoleon who overthrew the Diretory and became a French military dictator created a united legal code for France. The code included that equal before the law, careers open to talent, free belief, protection of private property, abolition of feudalism and a secular state (Napoleon, 2010). Napoleon also valued education. As the most able Russian monarch, Catherine also influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment. She encouraged nobles to travel in Western Europe and building school to educate aristocrats. She often communicated with some philosophes. She regarded herself as an enlightened despot. She limited the punishments that the nobles inflicted on the serfs. She also abolished the death punishment. But when the thoughts challenged her rule, she began to object to it (Catherine, 2010). Although the ideas were not carried out completely to the end, it also shook some traditional thoughts.

The impact of Enlightenment on human history should never be undervalued. It weakened the influence of organized religion. It also encouraged the replacement of Christian values, which had guided Europeans on religion and moral affairs for a very long time. Furthermore, it encouraged political and cultural leaders to rationally analyze the society and intervene actively in the Enlightenment matters for the interests that brought from promoting progress and prosperity. In many ways, the

Enlightenment thought continues to influence European and Euro-American societies in the following centuries.

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