

The impact of enlightenment philosophy essay



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Enlightenment gave importance and self-worth to the individual in the society and in the government. We must ask ourselves, how did this great event Enlightenment help the society and government in general? What sort of ideas/ideals made the greatest impact? The works and thoughts of many philosophes (philosophers) encouraged and influenced people to think differently about the environment around them. This is the basis of the ideology of Enlightenment. This brings us to another question, what sort of restrictions were the people in the society living under? Well, Enlightenment created a movement that made people question the ideas and beliefs that were imposed on them. These beliefs and facts that they were supposed to believe in were prescribed by their society with no proper logic or reasoning. Once intelligent people of the society figured out the right answers and ideas based on good reasoning and logic, they took action to change things. The ideology of Enlightenment quickly spread around and got people reconsidering the high power of the church and government.

“ Political thought in the European Enlightenment fed continuously on this pre-Enlightenment mentality of empirical interrogation of past dogma and theory, of rational challenge to authority and tradition, of skepticism, scientific enquiry, increasing secularism and humanitarianism.” (William, 7)

The Enlightenment movement drastically changed everything. This was caused by a few great minds that thought of changing things for the better. A good example of this is our present government. Our government is separated into three balances of power. This was Montesquieu's idea of the European government which wasn't true but this idea influenced Americans to make their government like this. Montesquieu thought that separation of

powers was good because it didn't let any individual or group gain total control of the government.

John Locke, a great philosopher, made a great contribution to the Enlightenment ideology for both society and government. His ideas were contradictory to the ideas of Hobbes. Since, they were complete opposites. Locke believed that human nature was good while Hobbes believed that human nature was bad. Hobbes argued that his idea was right, and that for people to escape that horrible way of living, they had to give their rights away to a strong absolute leader or ruler and in return they got law and order. This was the social contract. Locke was completely against this and favored self-government. According to Locke, people were born free and equal with three natural rights which are: life, liberty, and propriety. He said that the purpose of government is to protect these rights.

“ The civil freedom that Locke defines, as, “ something protected by the force of political laws, comes increasingly to be interpreted as the freedom to trade, to exchange without the interference of governmental regulation.”

Within the context of the Enlightenment, economic freedom is a salient interpretation of the individual freedom highly valued in the period.”

(Bristow)

Locke's theory had a great influence on modern political thinking. His belief that a government should come from the people, is the foundation and start of modern democracy. Actually, when Thomas Jefferson wrote the declaration of independence, he included the ideals of John Locke by adding “ Life, Liberty, and The Pursuit of Happiness.” He also included more things

in the document about freedom and human worth which all went back to Locke's teachings. After the Glorious Revolution of the 1680s, Locke worked on Newton's principles and theories in psychology, maturity, and political theory. Enlightenment, as an ideology, spread all over, and came into full bloom.

"Voltaire brought skepticism of his century to life. He wrote about the very strict and traditional religion and about the injustices that the old regimes caused." (Hackett) He made fun of and criticized all that was happening with his satires. For example, his book *Candide* was written in a sarcastic tone that parodies romance and adventure clichés. The book mocks religion, governments, armies, philosophies, and philosophers. His humor about these things spread ideas about changing how things were. Even though Voltaire was sent to exile in a French prison, it still didn't stop him from fighting for tolerance. He fought against injustice, intolerance, inequality, ignorance, superstition, and he constantly went against and attacked the church. He also fought for freedom of press, and attacked corruption and oppression. His hard work got even kings and queens to change and become better by giving the people more freedom. The kings and queens were called enlightenment despots because they were patrons of the arts and supporters of enlightenment ideals and philosophers. In a way, Voltaire showed that one person can make a big difference with the right tools and reasoning to back them up.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a bit different than the rest of the French philosophes. He did believe in the general ideals of the Enlightenment, but he didn't trust science and reason. Rousseau argued in one of his essays that

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the advancements in science and art corrupted the good in people. His idea or theory in general was that people were practically good in nature but then it became corrupted by the intricate and difficult historical events which somehow made the modern society. He was very committed and was a great fan of individual freedom. Rousseau believed in a direct democracy. A direct democracy is a free government formed by the people and guided by the will of the society. He actually saw the social contract as the path of freedom. But this social contract was very different than Hobbes'. He saw this contract as an agreement between the free human beings to create a society and a government. Rousseau argued that titles of nobility and classes should be gone and that all people are equal. His ideas inspired many leaders and rebels of the French Revolution who overthrew and attacked the monarchy.

Mary Wollstonecraft was a strong woman in the Enlightenment movement. Her acts were very rare, and an outrage in society. She fought and argued for women rights, and said that the rights of men and women were equal. Mary's ideas were instantly rejected. Everyone thought she was completely crazy. In this time, women had no right to vote and they had no say in government. And Men in general, didn't want to listen to her. Mary's thoughts were brushed off by the people in the society, but in the female society, her ideas were itching at the back of their minds. Now, in this new modern society, women are treated equal with men. All this happened, with a woman spreading her good ideas which got to other women which in the end got recognition and gave rights to women.

The Enlightenment movement used many ideas from many philosophers to improve the importance of an individual in the society and government.

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These prominent philosophers contributed in changing the way people acted and thought. People started to see things for what they were, and in a different light. The Enlightenment ideology made them want to change the government and their society. Through this movement the people of the society gained more power and worth individually in both the society and government.