6. Skepticism and Romanticism:

**Events**
1748 Hume publishes *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
1762 Rousseau publishes *The Social Contract*
1770 Rousseau finishes *Confessions*

**Key People**
- David Hume - Scottish thinker and pioneer in skepticism who questioned the human ability to know anything with certainty
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau - Swiss-French writer and philosopher who espoused democracy in *The Social Contract* and inspired the Romantic movement with *Confessions* and other works

**New Movements**
As the Enlightenment progressed into the mid-1700s, a noticeable shift occurred away from the empirical, reason-based philosophies of most of the leading French and English thinkers. The new philosophies that developed tended to take one of two major directions. Romanticism, a philosophy strongly attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, stressed emotion and a return to the natural state of man instead of the confines and constructs of society. Skepticism, which gained prominence under Scottish philosopher David Hume and was later elevated by German philosopher Immanuel Kant (see Kant, p. 33), questioned whether we as human beings are truly able to perceive the world around us with any degree of accuracy. These two movements, along with Church anti-Enlightenment propaganda and increasing unrest as the French Revolution neared, marked a departure from those thoughts that dominated the peak of the Enlightenment.

**Hume**
David Hume (1711–1776) was a Scottish writer and philosopher who paved the way for the future of the skeptical school of thought. A dogmatic skeptic, he devoted a substantial portion of his work to investigating the limits of human reasoning. Hume began his career in law but soon decided to devote himself to writing and philosophy. His first major work was *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), a book that, though now highly regarded, went widely ignored because of its complicated prose. Hume made up for this oversight in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), in which he rearticulated much of the same material in a more approachable manner.

Hume’s studies, which have since become fundamental in modern Western philosophy, focus on reason, perception, and especially morals. Hume questioned whether the senses, and thus perception, could be trusted for a consistent view of the world around us. In considering morality, Hume felt that if a person found a particular action reasonable, then that action was a morally appropriate thing to do. By adding this introspective, individual layer to the issues of perception and morality, Hume stripped the philosophical world of its generalizations.

Indeed, the unrelentingly skeptical Hume believed that everything was subject to some degree of uncertainty—an idea that turned the intellectual world on end. Regardless of how he himself felt about Enlightenment ideas, he kept returning to one thought: because we will never know anything beyond a doubt, why bother? Hume also applied his skeptical approach to science and religion, saying that even though neither was capable of fully explaining anything, science was stronger because it could admit that it would never be absolutely correct.
discoveries from pure deception.

The American Revolution

Across the Atlantic, the Enlightenment had a profound impact on the English colonies in America and ultimately on the infant nation of the United States. The colonial city of Philadelphia emerged as a chic, intellectual hub of American life, strongly influenced by European thought. Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) was the consummate philosophe: a brilliant diplomat, journalist, and scientist who traveled back and forth between Europe and America, acting as a conduit of ideas between them. He played a pivotal role in the American Revolution, which began in 1775, and the subsequent establishment of a democratic government under the Thomas Jefferson–penned Declaration of Independence (1776).

The political writer Thomas Paine (1737–1809) also brought Enlightenment ideas to bear on the American Revolution. An Englishman who immigrated to America, Paine was inspired by America and wrote the political pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), which encouraged the secession of the colonies from England. Later in his life, Paine’s religious views and caustic demeanor alienated him from much of the public, and he died in somewhat ill repute.

In many ways, the new United States was the Enlightenment, for its leaders could actually implement many of the ideas that European philosophers could only talk idly about. Americans were exposed to, and contributed to, the leading works of science, law, politics, and social order, yet lacked the traditions and conservativeness that impeded the European countries from truly changing their ways. Indeed, the Declaration of Independence borrows heavily from Enlightenment themes—even taking passages from Locke and Rousseau—and the U.S. Constitution implements almost verbatim Locke and Montesquieu’s ideas of separation of power. America was founded as a deist country, giving credit to some manner of natural God yet allowing for diverse religious expression, and also continued in the social and industrial veins that were begun in Europe.

The French Revolution

Just a decade after the revolution in America, France followed suit, with the French Revolution, which began in 1789. Inspired by the political philosophies of the Enlightenment, the French citizenry overthrew the monarchy of Louis XVI and established a representative government that was directly inspired by Enlightenment thought. This harmonious arrangement, however, soon fell prey to internal dissent, and leadership changed hands throughout the years that followed. The instability reached a violent climax with the ascent of Maximilien Robespierre, an extremist who plunged the revolution into the so-called Reign of Terror of 1793–1794, beheading more than 15,000 suspected enemies and dissenters at the guillotine. (For more information, see the History SparkNote The French Revolution.)

Distraught Frenchmen and other Europeans reacted to the tyranny of the Reign of Terror, as well as subsequent oppressive governments in France, by blaming the Enlightenment. These critics claimed that the Enlightenment’s attacks on tradition and questioning of norms would always lead inevitably to instability. Moreover, many critics in the nobility saw the violence of the Reign of Terror as proof positive that the masses, however “enlightened,” could never be trusted to govern themselves in an orderly fashion. Indeed, most historians agree that the French Revolution effectively marked the end of the Enlightenment. France itself reacted against the violence of the revolution by reverting to a military dictatorship under Napoleon that lasted fifteen years.

Long-Term Influence

Despite the brutalities of the French Revolution and the lingering resentment toward many philosophers, the Enlightenment had an indisputably positive effect on the Western world. Scientific advances laid an indestructible foundation for modern thought, while political and other
philosophies questioned and ultimately undermined oppressive, centuries-old traditions in Europe. After several transitional decades of instability in Europe, nearly everyone in Europe—along with an entire population in the United States—walked away from the Enlightenment in a better position. The movement resulted in greater freedom, greater opportunity, and generally more humane treatment for all individuals. Although the world still had a long way to go, and indeed still does, the Enlightenment arguably marked the first time that Western civilization truly started to become civilized.

Study Questions

1. *In what ways did the writings of Comenius and Grotius foreshadow the themes of the later Enlightenment?*

The works of Comenius and Grotius set the stage for Enlightenment thought in a variety of ways. First, the very fact that they were writing in protest of a national event—the Thirty Years’ War—was revolutionary, as most European governments up to that point had looked very unfavorably upon individuals who might be seen as undermining their authority. Moreover, the substance of Comenius’s and Grotius’s arguments contains clear elements that were mirrored in the works of later Enlightenment thinkers. Comenius emphasized the importance of education, claiming that educated citizens would be less likely to go to war. With this suggestion, Comenius made the same argument that the French philosophes would almost a century later—that reason, and the ability to think and analyze a situation, could solve the problems of the world. Both Comenius and Grotius stressed the importance of treating men as individuals, not as commodities—a sentiment that they expressed in different ways. Comenius felt that, physiologically speaking, we are all the same, and it is therefore unnecessary to fight with each other. Grotius wrote that we all have a responsibility to God to use our lives wisely, and thus giving one’s life for war is an irresponsible way to die. In short, although they phrased it different ways, both men set forth the same ideas: individual liberty, humane treatment for citizens, and ultimately a change in the way that nations and rulers viewed their citizens.

2. *Compare and contrast Hobbes’s perspective on man with Locke’s and explain how that perspective affects their respective ideal governments.*

Although both hailed from England and both rose to prominence early in the Enlightenment, Hobbes and Locke took diametrically opposite approaches in their political philosophies. Hobbes was steadfast in his belief that all humans are inherently evil or base by nature. As a result, all people are intrinsically motivated to provide themselves with as many resources as possible. Because resources in the world are limited, people thus become selfish and greedy in their competition for these resources. From this belief emerged Hobbes’s ideal government: one in which a single figure oversees a country and rules using fear. Hobbes believed that fear was the most effective way to control the citizenry and prevent the disorder that would result from each individual greedily pursuing his or her wants.

Locke was far more optimistic, stating that all humans were capable and that they strove for the betterment of the world. His one caveat was that humans in a society would all have to compromise on some of their ideals in the interest of forming a government that best served everyone—however, he believed that humans were reasonable enough to do so. Subsequently, Locke was a proponent of a representative democracy. Such a system would allow all of these rational, thinking people in a society to contribute to their governance, but in such a way that found compromise and kept any one individual’s or group’s wants from crowding out the others.

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