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The Enlightenment: Society Sees the Light

Directions: Close read the following passage, circling terms you don't know and defining them in the margin in terms you understand. Then, reread the passage. Use the text boxes to answer the question posed at the beginning of each section in your own words. Lastly, answer the question at the end of the article on a separate sheet.

What was the Enlightenment?

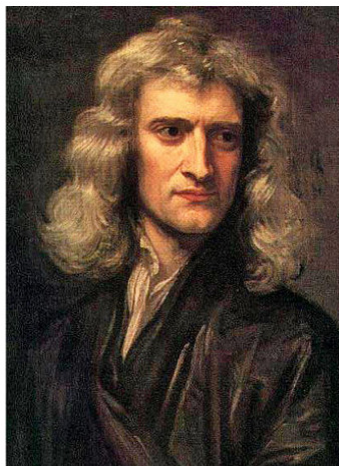
During the middle 1700's many French writers and artists were criticizing their society. They wanted to use reason (organized thinking) to solve society's problems. Their writings began a social movement that historians call the Enlightenment or Age of Reason. Enlightened thinkers (we also call these people "philosophers") lived all over Europe, but France became the center of the Enlightenment.

Enlightened thinkers thought that many of society's problems started with the types of governments people were living under. They wanted to improve government. These philosophers also wanted to reform (change) unreasonable customs and traditions. Many of them thought people should have more political, economic, and religious freedom...more liberty could improve the lives of everyone.



The Enlightenment "happened" wherever educated people gathered to discuss big ideas. Some people in French society became famous for throwing parties in which famous philosophers would read their works and discuss ideas. The goals of these "salons" (gatherings) were always the same: amuse each other and increase one another's knowledge through conversation.

Answer



Isaac Newton was really a scientist rather than a philosopher. However, his *Principia* had a profound effect on people of his time. Newton's idea that the Universe is based upon natural and understandable laws became the foundation for Enlightenment thinking.

How Did the Enlightenment Get Started?

In 1687 an English scientist named Isaac Newton published a book about a scientific law he had discovered. His *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* used mathematics to show how gravity applied to the universe. Newton discovered gravity by using reason. He did not experiment. Using only reason he discovered a mathematical law which controls the planets and other objects in space.

After reading Newton's book, people began to think of the universe as a kind of huge clock. A clock ticks off the minutes of the day in a predictable and orderly way. They believed that the universe worked this way too. It followed predictable laws.

Newton influenced many scientists. They decided to use careful, scientific reasoning to find the truth about how nature worked. He influenced non-scientists too. They now knew that nature followed natural laws. Maybe other natural laws controlled the actions of human beings. If so, then scientific reasoning was a tool. They could use this tool to solve the problems of society.

Answer

What Exactly Were “Enlightened” Thinkers and What Were Their Goals?

Philosophers who believed in scientific thinking called themselves enlightened thinkers because they had “found the light.” No longer did they walk around in the darkness of ignorance (lack of knowledge). Enlightened thinkers asked difficult questions. They searched for truth about how nature and human societies really work.

Newton’s ideas helped to begin the Age of Reason. During this age, many enlightened thinkers had three goals: They wanted...

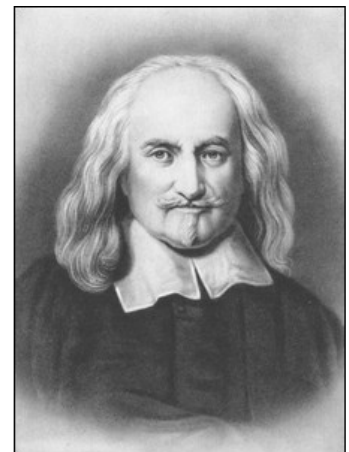
1. To improve how people lived.
2. To think clearly and logically, without letting their feelings guide them.
3. To use scientific reasoning to study every part of society – education, religion, economics, law and government.

Answer

What Did Thomas Hobbes Say About Government?

In 1651, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes published a book on government. According to Hobbes, at one time people lived without any government. Their lives were short and unhappy. At some point, people agreed to give up their freedom to a ruler to gain order and safety.

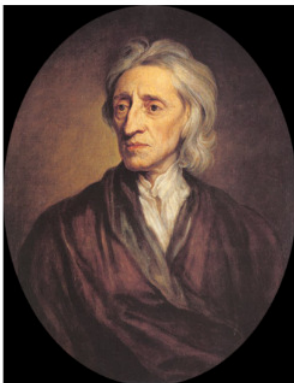
Hobbes thought that an unwritten agreement existed between the ruler and the ruled. He called it a **social contract**. Under this agreement, people agreed to obey the rulers even if they ruled poorly. Hobbes said that kings needed absolute power to keep people from fighting among themselves. For Hobbes, order was more important than freedom. Nevertheless, Hobbes argued that reason, not religion, should direct people’s lives.



Hobbes was alive during the chaos of the English Civil War. He argued that for ordinary people to have decent lives, they needed a very strong government to keep them safe and orderly - a government with the strength of a sea monster. The title of Hobbes' book: *Leviathan*, an old name for a sea monster.

Answer

What Did Locke Have to Say About Government?



Among other ideas, Locke was an empiricist...he believed that what anyone knows comes only or mostly from the senses (not through faith or tradition or knowledge that is somehow inborn). His ideas about the role of government in people’s lives had a powerful influence on American colonial leaders during the American Revolution.

In 1690, Englishman John Locke published another book on government. Like Hobbes, Locke thought that government should keep order in society. He also thought government was a contract, or legal agreement, between the ruler and those who are ruled. But the two men had different ideas too. For example, Locke believed that people were reasonable. Given the chance they would act in an orderly manner.

Unlike Hobbes, Locke believed that people were born with certain rights that must be protected. He identified these **natural rights** as the rights to life, liberty and property. The job of a government was to protect the citizens’ natural rights. Locke said that

people kept these rights even when they agreed to be governed. He believed that people had a right to rebel when a ruler or government did not protect these rights.

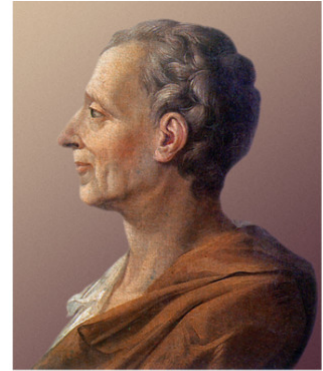
Answer

What Did Montesquieu Say About Government?

Across the English Channel in France, two enlightened thinkers also published books about government. One of them was Baron de Montesquieu. He studied the government of ancient Rome and many governments of his own time. Then, in 1748, he published a book about his studies, *The Spirit of the Laws*.

Montesquieu thought that the best monarchs used their wealth and power for the good of everyone. Virtue, or goodness to one another, held a republic together. Montesquieu said that people in a republic needed to elect leaders who would serve the good of the community.

Baron de Montesquieu admired the English government of the 1700s. It divided power into three branches. Parliament made the laws. The king enforced the laws. The courts interpreted the laws. Montesquieu said that separating these powers kept each of the three branches from becoming too powerful. Each branch checked and balanced the power of the two other branches.



American colonial leaders referred to Montesquieu in their writings more often than any other Enlightenment philosopher before the American Revolution. Ironically, Montesquieu believed that Great Britain was the model of an advanced, liberty-minded government.

Answer

How Did Rousseau Differ from Hobbes?

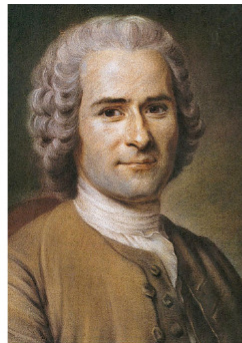
Another philosopher living in France at the time was Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau said that people had once done only good things. They began to do bad things when civilization developed.

This was just the opposite of what Hobbes had said. Hobbes believed people were born greedy and selfish. Civilization made them responsible and orderly.

Rousseau turned Hobbes's ideas upside down. He said that people are born good and that civilization made them evil. "Man is born free," he wrote, "but everywhere he is in chains."

Rousseau strongly believed that peasants were just as good as kings and nobles. He said that no one was better than anyone else, so no one should have any special privileges or rights. All were equal. Later, many leaders of the French Revolution would use his ideas to justify abolishing the nobility.

Rousseau published his book on government in 1762. In it he disagreed with Hobbes and Locke and their idea of a contract between the ruler and the ruled. Rousseau said that in order to get along, people made a contract with each other, not



Rousseau was perhaps the most talented and original of the Enlightenment philosophers. He wrote novels and composed operas. Most of the philosophers of his time disagreed with his belief that religion was as necessary as reason. Rousseau once helped a critic get an essay published that was critical of...Rousseau. Never a wealthy man, he once turned down a lifelong income offered by the King Louis XV of France.

with a ruler. He thought that shared customs, traditions, and values held a community of people together. Rousseau called these shared customs, traditions, and values the “general will.” According to Rousseau, a community expressed what it wanted through this general will. Because of that, Rousseau favored rule by the majority through a direct democracy.

Answer

What Rights Did Voltaire Think People Had?

Another enlightened French thinker who influenced many people was Voltaire. He wrote histories, poetry and over 50 plays. He used many of these to criticize the wealth and privileges of French kings and nobles and the Catholic Church. Twice King Louis XV put Voltaire in jail to silence him.



Easily the most prolific of the Enlightenment philosophers, Voltaire wrote over 20,000 letters and more than 2,000 books and pamphlets during his lifetime. His criticism of the most powerful institutions of Europe often put him at risk of imprisonment. Consequently, he moved often. Voltaire’s favorite tool was satire, mocking the powerful to pressure or shame them into changing their behavior.

Voltaire defended a person’s right to think and speak freely. He is reported to have said, “I do not agree with a word you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Voltaire also supported freedom of religion. According to Voltaire, free speech, a free press, and religious freedom were rights that belonged to every person, and enlightened governments had to respect these rights. Because Voltaire’s ideas were used in creating the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, most Americans probably most appreciate his contribution to the Enlightenment “conversation.”

Answer

What Did All This Enlightened Thinking Lead To?

The many philosophers of the Enlightenment were like a chorus of voices calling for change to government. Most governments in Europe at that time were monarchies. Most Enlightenment philosophers thought that monarchies needed to be reformed or even done away with. All of the philosophers’ books and essays and salon discussions did little until political leaders and ordinary people took seriously Enlightenment philosophers’ calls for change. Ideas had to be put into action.

A series of events in the late 1700s would eventually prove how dangerous all this talk had been. Two societies would be rocked by two different revolutions. One would separate New World colonies from a distant mother country. The other would turn Europe’s most populous nation on its head. Both the American Revolution and the French Revolution involved people taking the ideas of the philosophes very seriously. Both shook the Europe’s monarchies to their core. The consequences of each Revolution would be widely felt for centuries to come.

Answer

Reflection question: (*Paragraph*) Which of the philosophers discussed above made the most important impact on modern life? Describe at least two reasons for your answer and carefully cite your evidence.