

# Enlightenment, The

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## Abstract

The term *Enlightenment* is used to refer to intellectual and social developments in the 18th century. The underlying force was an increasing belief in the scientific approach to attaining knowledge, as opposed to the medieval reliance on religion and tradition. The more successful science became, the more intellectuals began to see the scientific method as a way to organize society. With respect to clinical psychology, the Enlightenment was characterized by a new approach to mental illness and the treatment of the mentally ill, who became seen as ailing patients in need of help in specialized institutions.

The term *Enlightenment* (also Age of Enlightenment or Age of Reason) is used to refer to eighteenth-century intellectual and social developments in Europe and America (Hampson, 1968; O'Hara, 2010). The underlying force was an increasing belief in the scientific approach to attaining knowledge, as opposed to the medieval reliance on religion and tradition, represented by the Church and the Royal Court or the aristocracy. A new way of thinking, based on observation and experimentation rather than on study of the Church Fathers and scholars from ancient civilizations, had gained momentum in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century with core publications by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), René Descartes (1596–1650), and Isaac Newton (1642–1727). This change in thinking is often referred to as the scientific revolution.

One of the hallmarks of the Enlightenment was the publication of the *Encyclopédie*, edited by the French scholars Denis Diderot (1713–84) and Jean d'Alembert (1717–83) between 1751 and 1772 (17 volumes of text). In these books a team of authors discussed the various achievements of Man, to provide a systematic dictionary of the sciences, arts and crafts. The aim of the *Encyclopédie* was not only to make the information easily available, but also to change the way people think, namely, in the direction of the scientific method. One of the topics covered was

psychology. The entry was influenced heavily by the writings of the Polish-German mathematician and philosopher Christian Wolff (1679–1754). Wolff saw psychology as a new part of philosophy and distinguished rational psychology from empirical psychology. The former started from axioms (self-evident truths) and sought to discover truth through deductive reasoning. Empirical psychology, in contrast, established knowledge on the basis of introspection. These ideas found their way to English-speaking readers when they were echoed in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, first published between 1768 and 1771.

Another change that characterized the Enlightenment was a new organization of the universities. For a long time universities were dominated by the humanities (the study of literature, culture, art, law, history, philosophy) and religion. Proponents of the scientific approach managed to gradually increase the influence of departments embracing the new scientific methods. These changes started in the eighteenth century and gained momentum in the nineteenth century with the reforms of the universities in the German states after defeats by the French.

The influence of the Enlightenment was not limited to the intellectual realm. The more successful science became, the more intellectuals in the Western world began to see it as a way to not only gather knowledge but also to organize society. Autonomous and scientific thinking were considered better sources of legitimacy than was the authority of existing institutions, customs, and morals. This conviction played a role in the outbreak of the American War of Independence (1775–83) and the French Revolution (1789–99). Both were intended to replace the ruling powers by a more reasonable government inspired by the scientific method, as testified in the Declaration of Independence written by the new American authorities, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, written by the French revolutionaries. In other countries, rulers adapted to the new ideas and presented themselves as enlightened absolutists, organizing their country on rationality, stimulating religious tolerance and free speech, and surrounding themselves with scientists and artists.

Another consequence of the Enlightenment was a different approach to the conception and treatment of the mentally ill (Porter, 2002). At the beginning of the eighteenth century, an increasing number of people with mental disorders were treated as criminals and secluded in

asylums. However, during the Enlightenment, notable figures maintained that the inhabitants of asylums were not criminals, but rather ailing patients in need of help. Important names in this evolution were William Battie (1703–76) in England, who published the first book on psychiatry *Treatise on madness* (1758), and Philippe Pinel (1745–1826) in France.

Because the new ideas undermined the privileges of those in power, adherents were at times suppressed. This was the case, for instance, in France when the *Encyclopédie* was banned in 1793. At the same time, the *Encyclopédie*'s fate illustrates society's ambivalence towards the changes, as the contributors were not incarcerated and had supporters in the services that were supposed to control them. One reason for the ambivalence was arguably that the countries most open to the scientific method (mainly the Protestant countries) rapidly saw their power grow. Indeed, the second half of the eighteenth century also saw the beginnings of the industrial revolution, when mechanical improvements started to change the century-old traditions in agriculture and manufacturing.

During the nineteenth century, inspired by the Enlightenment, various philosophical doctrines regarding the virtues and limitations of the scientific method emerged, with implications for science and for society at large. An example of the former was positivism, as evidenced by the writings of Auguste Comte (1798–1857). An example of the latter was Romanticism, which questioned the scientific tenets of Enlightenment (rationalism, empiricism, the search for universal truths). Instead, Romanticism emphasized the individual, subjective, irrational, imaginative, personal, spontaneous, and emotional aspects of humans. Scholars from the humanities and religious organizations also voiced continued skepticism about the advantages of science. As such, the Enlightenment was an important phase in the growing separation between the science-minded and the humanities-minded part of civilization, a phenomenon described by Snow (1959) as the emergence of two cultures, largely living next to each other with an occasional skirmish.

## References

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#### Further Reading

Brysbart, M., & Rastle, K. (2013). *Historical and conceptual issues in psychology* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Pearson Education.