**The Enlightenment or Age of Reason:**  **1700s / Eighteenth Century � Europe and America****[[1]](http://www.westga.edu/~mmcfar/enlightenment_or_age_of_reas.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1%22%20%5Co%20%22)**

The ***Enlightenment***, also known as the ***Age of Reason***, is the name given to the *period in Europe and America during the 1700s when mankind was emerging from centuries of ignorance into a new age enlightened by reason, science, and respect for humanity*. People of the Enlightenment were convinced that human reason could (1) discover the **natural laws** of the universe and (2) determine the **natural rights** of mankind; (3) thereby unending **progress** in knowledge, technical achievement, and moral values would be realized.[[2]](http://www.westga.edu/~mmcfar/enlightenment_or_age_of_reas.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2%22%20%5Co%20%22)

This new way of thinking led to the development of a new religious thought known as (4) **Deism**. Deists believed in God as a great inventor or architect who had created the universe then allowed it to function like a machine or clock without divine intervention. Although Deists believed in a hereafter, they believed human achievement and happiness should be the focus of this life rather than the life to come.

*Benevolence toward less fortunate people*, (5) ***humanitarianism***, resulted. Difficult though it is for us to realize, the idea that people who are more fortunate should assist those who are less fortunate was, in fact, a new concept during the Enlightenment. Prior to this, religious beliefs perceived assistance to the unfortunate as interference with God because people thought if someone were unfortunate, it was God�s will and was punishment for wrongdoing.

**Major Changes in Europe: Political, Social, Economic, and Religious**

**Politically,** wars during the 1700s were most often fought *within* countries over secession to a throne rather than *between* countries. Monarchies still often ruled during the 1700s, but with less security than in earlier times. The English executed their king in 1642, France executed their king and queen (in 1793 and 1794 respectively) during the French Revolution, and other European monarchies soon fell. Royal instability suggested insecurity of the social order over which aristocracies had ruled.

**Economically,** new trade between countries generated new wealth. The newly wealthy tradesman and merchant class demanded a share of the social and political power formally held only by the nobility. As a result of the political and economic changes during the eighteenth century, there were major **social** changes as well. The former rigid class system based on inherited positions of nobility and wealth became far less secure.

There were also major **religious** changes during the 1700s. There was a significant decline in church power and prestige, which resulted primarily from people�s no longer believing in God�s daily involvement in their human affairs. Prior to the Enlightenment, before the discovery of natural laws, people had believed that every event that occurred, no matter how major or minor, was a direct result of God�s intervention. Once scientists discovered that natural laws caused these occurrences, mankind feared God less, and as a result, religious obligations were no longer the primary concern of many people.

Rather than focusing on God and the church, people of the Enlightenment focused on man. Alexander Pope, a famous English poet, wrote a ***rhyming couplet*** (*two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme*) that describes well the attitude of the time: �Know then thyself; presume not God to scan. / The proper study of mankind is man.�

The eighteenth century recognized the interdependence of men on each other. Rather than the agricultural society prevalent during the previous feudal period, the 1700s saw the development of cosmopolitan society. People lived in clusters and depended upon each other rather than living alone and being independent of one another. The importance of cooperation and mutual respect became obvious.

**Eighteenth Century vs. Twenty-First Century**

There are two particularly interesting and thought-provoking basic differences between the 18th century and the 21st century. First, a feeling of obligation to society was prevalent then. People of the Enlightenment believed that shared beliefs were more important than personal opinion. Public life mattered more than one�s private life. A second important area of contrast between the 18th and 21st centuries is manners or decorum. People of the Enlightenment believed that a well defined code of manners and behavior was necessary to allow men to live in harmonious groups. Manners or decorum consisted of agreed upon behavior appropriate for specific situations; we might refer to such practices as social etiquette. In the 1700s, people believed commitment to decorum helped preserve society�s important moral standards.

**Characteristics of Literature during the 1700s/18th Century**

Most literature was ***nonfiction,*** which means it was *based on fact rather than being made up by the author's imagination*. The literature of this period was realistic. Its aims were to instruct, to enlighten, and to make people think. These people believed reason shows life as it is; whereas, the imagination shows life as people wish it were or fear it may be. The people of the Enlightenment revered the power of the mind to reason and to determine realities. They deprecated passions and emotions. They saw reason as the ruling principle of life and the key to progress and perfection. This was an optimistic, self-confident period of time in Europe. People felt they knew all the answers; they were content, and they were smug!

      ***Overview*:** The basic ideas of the Enlightenment are roughly the same as the basic ideas of humanism�[[3]](http://www.westga.edu/~mmcfar/enlightenment_or_age_of_reas.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn3%22%20%5Co%20%22)

a)       There is a stable, coherent, knowable self. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal�no physical conditions or differences substantially affect how this self operates.

b)      This self knows itself and the world through reason, or rationality, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form.

c)       The mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is �science,� which can provide universal truths about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower.

d)      The knowledge produced by science is �truth,� and is eternal.

e)       The knowledge/truth produced by science (by the rational objective knowing self) will always lead toward progress and perfection. All human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science (reason/objectivity) and improved.

f)        Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true, and therefore of what is right, and what is good (what is legal and what is ethical). Freedom consists of obedience to the laws that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason.

g)       In a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and the right (and the beautiful); there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right (etc.).

h)      Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge. Science is neutral and objective; scientists, those who produce scientific knowledge through their unbiased rational capacities, must be free to follow the laws of reason, and not be motivated by other concerns (such as money or power).

[[1]](http://www.westga.edu/~mmcfar/enlightenment_or_age_of_reas.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1%22%20%5Co%20%22)This information comes directly from Beverly McClure�s website, Associate Professor of Languages and Literature @ Southwest Tennessee Community College, Memphis, Tennessee.

[[2]](http://www.westga.edu/~mmcfar/enlightenment_or_age_of_reas.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref2%22%20%5Co%20%22)The main stimulus for the Enlightenment was the scientific discoveries of natural laws. For example, Galileo recognized the movement of planets, moons, and stars, and Sir Isaac Newton discovered gravity.

[[3]](http://www.westga.edu/~mmcfar/enlightenment_or_age_of_reas.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref3%22%20%5Co%20%22)This information is cited directly from Dr. Mary Klages�s website, English Dept., University of Colorado Boulder