LEARNING ENHANCEMENT SITES:

Here, at the top of some of the unit lectures, will be a variety of outside videos (some serious; some satiric). You are not responsible for them, but please click on the links, pictures, or icons for the perspectives the videos offer. This is an experimental feature of the course, to be integrated more thoroughly in future versions.

“Enlightenment” replacement link for below


EUROPEAN ENLIGHTENMENT SUMMARY

Ponder these general points about the Enlightenment period, roughly between John Locke’s Second Treatise (1690) and the French Revolution (1789):

The Enlightenment comes between the Renaissance (the age of Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare) and now (modern democratic, technological societies). Enlightenment figures saw themselves as breaking the chains of the past and propelling humankind into the future. Renaissance scholars thought this, too; but Enlightenment thinkers added a) optimism in technology and empirical observation, b) democratization, and c) the cultural relativism of proto-anthropology via exploration and colonialism (i.e. reports of other, exotic cultures--natives in Hawai’i Go to this enhancement site, not required, for example--allowed progressive thinkers, such as J.J. Rousseau, to question the West as the only standard of value).

Think of five positive macro points that could be made about the Enlightenment period:

1) Enlightenment science emphasizes the non-theological, objective/systematic search for truth. The scientific eye, as it were, is removed from nature, enabling it to gaze upon nature at a distance and catalogue it. View this famous painting by Charles W. Peale, friend of Jefferson and other U.S. Founding Fathers, who owned and developed the first rationally-organized natural history museum in the U.S. ([E-text: Charles W. Peale painting and Ben Franklin perfection chart](https://example.com)). For the Enlightenment philosopher/thinker, the vertical/hierarchical scheme of the Great Chain of Being no longer structures the cosmos and God is not perceived as intervening in the Creation. (This notion of a Creator who creates but then lets the creation spin on its way mechanistically is called “Deism”; a common analogy of the period is to liken God to a cosmic clock-maker--the clock is made
and is evidence of a maker, but the clock runs itself). Newton’s laws of motion and gravity explain the physical world in a mechanistic, non-capricious/non-miraculous, and predictable way. Before Newton, a cannon ball drops to the earth because God, in effect, so wills its downward motion; after Newton—with his laws of physics—army generals can precisely/mathematically calculate the curved trajectory of the cannon ball. Similarly, for the realm of botany, it is only via Linnaeus’s systematic cataloguing scheme (see E-text: Linnaeus website (read 1st several paragraphs and “Linnean taxonomy” sections)) that nature comes into ordered clarity. Before the Enlightenment natural history museums did not exist. Rather, there were cabinets of curiosity (housing mermaid tails, dinosaur bones, two-head cow skulls, and the like) that the rich and royal collected, as a reflection of their own wealth and their appreciation for the rare, awe-inspiring, unique creations of God. In the Enlightenment, natural history museums start to display an ordered sequence of difference and similarity; note Peale’s natural history museum with grid-like shelves for natural specimens. The Great Chain of Being ranked species etc. in an ordered fashion according to how much each reflected the perfection of God; in the Enlightenment the ordering is, as it were, no longer vertical but instead horizontal. Knowledge becomes knowledge of the relations within a classificatory system. Later in the 19th-C, Darwin discovers the process of evolution by comparing a chain of similarly/differently modified bird species on a sequence of islands in the Galapagos.

As this knowledge is primarily one of visual difference/similarity, the 18th-century is also the century when mimetic representation in fictional narrative takes off—i.e., the first novels are written in this period, which reflect “reality” in great detail (“mimetic” and “mimesis” are specialized aesthetic/literary terms for a style of art that realistically represents; the novel Robinson Crusoe, written by Daniel Defoe early in the eighteenth century, is very adventuristic—but most of it is just detailed description of Crusoe’s mundane actions, e.g., constructing a telescope, planting seeds, building a hut, and so on, after his shipwreck; previous narratives tended to be much more allegorical, i.e., about a universal Everyman seeking redemption and avoiding or succumbing to temptation).

2) Enlightenment thinkers believe that historical progress will be expedited if the citizenry avoid “superstition” and blind obedience. In general, they see history and world cultures as progressing through stages (savage, barbaric/nomadic, pastoral/farming, and civilized/urban) and, as partisan viewpoints are eliminated, universal truth/democracy and more liberty as emerging. For them, history progresses in the extension of liberty: the people will gain sovereignty instead of being ruled by tyrants; proto-feminists (Wollstonecraft, mother of the author of Frankenstein) argue for women’s rights; and Equiano and others argue for the abolition of slavery.

3) Both society and the self can be perfected, Enlightenment philosophers optimistically think. Read the excerpt from Ben Franklin in the e-text above (E-text: Peale Painting and Franklin perfection chart): Franklin’s perfection chart is the predecessor of all the self-help/improvement books you can buy at any bookstore.

4) Enlightenment economics glories in non-communal/non-feudal modes of exchange, entrepreneurial energy and the private acquisition of wealth, and what we, in general, would today call "market-place" values.

5) Countries in the “West” feel obliged to spread European religion, science, and trade to seemingly backward native cultures (when you read Equiano in two weeks, ponder whether his attitude towards his indigenous, African home culture changes from the beginning to the end of his narrative).
But also think of corresponding negative points:

Read the points below in counterbalance to the 1-5 points above:

1) Nature, though fascinating, is no longer mysterious or sacred; nature becomes an objectified reserve of resources to be exploited. The Romantics (to be read after the "Enlightenment" sequence) will be repulsed by the overly mechanistic concepts of nature that the Enlightenment period embraces.

2) The modern nation state--although enfranchising citizens/voters and the possibility of dissent again unjust rule--develops more and more bureaucratic control and administration. It was most unpleasant to be a criminal in the sixteenth/seventeenth centuries (when severe physical punishment and other forms of swift justice were meted out), but in the eighteenth century, although prisons become more humane (the penitentiary is created--ponder the root meaning of the word!), acts of criminality become more and more extensive. An experiment: how many documents of identity are in your wallet right now? How many ways can you get “in trouble” without going to prison--late fees, parking tickets, etc. etc.? In “enlightened” democratic countries you are not whipped, but you are disciplined by being made subject to vast/micro-precise law routinely. You are strongly defined by being subjected to endless FCATs, SATs, driver license registrations, FIU parking stickers, et al. This extends to the realm of advertisement and consumerism. Are you given more freedom by having 30 brands of toothpaste to choose from; or are advertisers placing you in a statistically-derived consumer niche, somebody who might like plain white toothpaste vs. cherry-flavored toothpaste? What you see in the mall or grocery store is not a vast realm of choice, but rather a world of precisely calculated niche products that seduce you via your identification with them. It’s not the product “label”; it’s your being labeled by the product. The late 18th/19th C. citizen in Europe more or less becomes liberated from absolutistic monarchial rule; however, he is then subjected to bureaucratic domination and control in the late 19th/20th centuries. Of course, it’s likely better to live in a free democracy than under a totalitarian regime, but don’t let ethical repulsion of totalitarianism keep you from critiquing the alienating features of the modern capitalist state.

3) Mechanics can be applied to human behavior, too. The e-text excerpt from Franklin suggests he believed the self can be perfected thru a mechanistic regimen. In the Christian theological tradition, “sin” matters; for Franklin, there are merely errors of selfhood that can be remedied. On the one hand, crippling guilt is thereby eliminated; on the other, the self becomes an entity always under superficial construction. Note, too: perhaps Franklin is a little obsessive? a little too “into” the engineering of selfhood?

4) The enclosure of common lands and improvements in agriculture creates crisis in villages. Rootless workers who must earn their living by meager wages fill London, Paris, and other major cities. Capitalist emphasis on good, cheap products that will sell (as opposed to a good product that manifests artisan craftsmanship) leads to a focus on efficiency and entrepreneurial spirit. Notice, when you read Equiano, how very happy he is as he accumulates money through his trading.

5) The “West” becomes utterly conceited with a notion of progress that puts Europeans at the apex, which in turn leads to bad apologetics for imperialism and colonial depredations.

Enlightenment ideas are essentially modern--we have more in common with Ben Franklin than we do with, say, a shoe-maker in the 15th-century who believes in the Great Chain of
But do not jump ahead too quickly into the democratizing Industrial Age (1790-1900); and remember that "Enlightenment" ideas pertain mostly to the intellectual elite:

Sure, literacy spread in the 18th-C; urban populations started to read newspapers (fostering chatter against rulers); there are lots of advances in knowledge and technology (encyclopedias, microscopes, and so on). Yet, most people still lived in the countryside and abided by centuries-old rhythms and superstitious beliefs. In the 18th-C a very self-conscious bourgeois/urban—as opposed to aristocratic/royal court—consciousness appears, but that applies to a relatively small percentage of any country’s population. In France, at the same moment Diderot is developing the world’s first encyclopedia (see the e-text E-text: Diderot Enlightenment Encyclopedia table of contents image) and, with fellow French thinkers, skeptically questioning authority, France’s monarch is still immensely strong (indeed, exercising absolute rule).