

Modern Influences of The Enlightenment And Counter-Enlightenment

The "Enlightenment" denotes a broad European social and intellectual movement that coincided roughly with the eighteenth century, giving that period the name the "Age of Reason." It was centered in England and France, where groups of likeminded thinkers worked together on the task of freeing human society from what they saw as the accumulated errors and superstitions of the past, in order to recreate it entirely on a rational and scientific basis. Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, and later Edward Gibbon and Jeremy Bentham, developed Enlightenment ideas in Scotland and England. In France a group of thinkers known as the *philosophers*, of whom Voltaire and Rousseau are the most well known, united under the editorship of Diderot and D'Alembert to produce the *Encyclopedic* of 1751, the summa of Enlightenment ideas.

Enlightenment thinkers placed their faith in autonomous human reason. They believed that the method of Newtonian physics, based on measurement and mathematical operations, could alone give reliable knowledge. Profoundly inspired by the apparent success of Newton in opening nature to our understanding, they sought to extend his methods to all human concerns—but most of all to the ordering of human life in society. They thought that Newton's laws revealed a universe that was neat, orderly, regulated, and rational through and through—like a gigantic mechanical clock in which everything fit smoothly and intelligibly together with no loose ends. Human societies were embedded within nature and part of it, yet human society, as they experienced it, was not like the universe: it was unruly, disordered, conflicted, and irrational.

Run by priests and kings whose authority derived from revelation and tradition and not scientific observation, society was, in a word, unenlightened. To overhaul human society, they thought we must extend Newton's method from inanimate nature to human beings and their moral, social, and political behavior. This program will uncover all the natural mechanisms that operate human beings and give us the same control over human nature that Newton's physics promised to give over inanimate nature.

In this way the Enlightenment propounded and initiated the cultural movement that enshrines the method of quantitative, empirical science as the only valid means of knowledge, seeks to extend the hegemony of science over all phenomena, and dismisses

anything not accessible to the method of mechanistic science as nonexistent or insignificant

The "Counter-Enlightenment" refers to the effort of a number of thinkers, contemporary with the Enlightenment to criticize and attack Enlightenment rationalism and scientism. The German theologian and philosopher J. G. Hamman, for example, began as a follower of the Enlightenment but turned into one of its most vigorous critics. Emphasizing feeling over abstract thinking, sympathetic participation over detached observation, inspiration over analytic reasoning, he was a forerunner of the attitudes that characterized the Romantic movement.

The Romanticism of the nineteenth century ran directly counter to the doctrines of the Enlightenment. The individual, the unique, and the exotic were valued over the universal, the uniform, and the familiar. The Middle Ages even returned to favor, and the Renaissance was viewed as a "second Fall." An interest in mysticism and mystical experience revived, and Oriental religions attracted students and admirers. Monistic, idealistic, and pantheistic philosophies proliferated. Nature was viewed as alive, as a seamlessly flowing organic whole. Science, with its piles of discrete measurement could only destroy and misrepresent: "We murder to dissect" as Wordsworth wrote.

The forces of both the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment are with us today. In the field of psychology, for example, the Enlightenment spirit is embodied in "behavioral psychology," which is dedicated to achieving reproducible results from controlled laboratory experiments on human and animal "subjects." It uses careful measurement to produce quantified data and subjects them to statistical analysis. But the spirit of the Counter-Enlightenment continues on in what is now called "humanistic psychology," which focuses on the emotional and spiritual concerns of people and is even open to recognizing religious experience as a major value in human life. Although both groups inhabit the field of psychology, they have little, if anything, to say to each other.

The unresolved conflict between these two cultural movements has determined much of the agenda of European history for the last three centuries. Both the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment are very much with us, but the shortcomings of both of them make progress unlikely. The stalemate will have to be broken by forces beyond the conflict.