

Study Material

English Honours

Sem V CC 11

Course Instructor: Rudrani Dasgupta Chaudhuri

Introduction to Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (Part 1)

The Age of Enlightenment

Enlightenment, French siècle des Lumières ("century of the Enlightened), German Aufklärung, is the European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries in which ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and humanity were synthesized into a worldview that gained wide assent in the West and that instigated revolutionary developments in art, philosophy, and politics. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and celebration of reason, the power by which humans understand the universe and improve their own condition. The goals of rational humanity were considered to be knowledge, freedom, and happiness.

The powers and uses of reason had first been explored by the philosophers of ancient Greece. The Romans adopted and preserved much of Greek culture, notably including the ideas of a rational natural order and natural law. Amid the turmoil of empire, however, a new concern arose for personal salvation, and the way was paved for the triumph of the Christian religion. The system of thought known as Scholasticism, culminating in the work of Thomas Aquinas, resurrected reason as a tool of understanding but subordinated it to spiritual revelation and the revealed truths of Christianity.

The intellectual and political edifice of Christianity, seemingly impregnable in the Middle Ages, fell in turn to the assaults made on it by Humanism, the Renaissance, and

the Protestant Reformation. Humanism bred the experimental science of Francis Bacon, Nicolaus Copernicus, and Galileo and the mathematical investigations of René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and Sir Isaac Newton. The Renaissance rediscovered much of Classical culture and revived the notion of humans as creative beings, and the Reformation, more directly but in the long run no less effectively, challenged the monolithic authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

To a degree, the Enlightenment spurred atheism, but more commonly, it resulted in a mix between Christianity and scientific rationalism. This is best illustrated by the deist movement that gripped Europe and the United States during the late 18th century. Deism is the belief that God exists, but chooses to let the universe proceed according to natural law. Deists deny supernatural occurrences and insist that God is knowable through reason and nature, not divine revelation. Deism is often conceptualized by a comparison with a clock and a clockmaker. In the deist view, God is the great 'clockmaker' who created the world (like a clock) and then allows it to 'run' according to natural operation (without supernatural intervention). Some of America's Founding Fathers were deists, most notably, Thomas Jefferson.

The Enlightenment produced the first modern secularized theories of psychology and ethics. John Locke conceived of the human mind as being at birth a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which experience wrote freely and boldly, creating the individual character according to the individual experience of the world. Supposed innate qualities, such as goodness or original sin, had no reality. In a darker vein, Thomas Hobbes portrayed humans as moved solely by considerations of their own pleasure and pain. The notion of humans as neither good nor bad but interested principally in survival and the maximization of their own pleasure led to radical political theories. Where the state had once been viewed as an earthly approximation of an eternal order, with the City of Man modeled on the City of God, now it came to be seen as a mutually beneficial arrangement among humans aimed at protecting the natural rights and self-interest of each.

The idea of society as a social contract, however, contrasted sharply with the realities of actual societies. Thus, the Enlightenment became critical, reforming, and eventually revolutionary. Locke and Jeremy Bentham in England, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis

Diderot, and Condorcet in France, and Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson in colonial America all contributed to an evolving critique of the arbitrary, authoritarian state and to sketching the outline of a higher form of social organization, based on natural rights and functioning as a political democracy. Such powerful ideas found expression as reform in England and as revolution in France and America.

. The celebration of abstract reason provoked contrary spirits to begin exploring the world of sensation and emotion in the cultural movement known as Romanticism. The Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution severely tested the belief that an egalitarian society could govern itself. The high optimism that marked much of Enlightenment thought, however, survived for the next two centuries as one of the movement's most-enduring legacies: the belief that human history is a record of general progress that will continue into the future.

Major Enlightenment Philosophers

Thomas Hobbes (5 April 1588 – 4 December 1679), was an English philosopher, considered to be one of the founders of modern political philosophy. Hobbes is best known for his 1651 book *Leviathan*, in which he expounds an influential formulation of social contract theory.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes set out his doctrine of the foundation of states and legitimate governments and creating an objective science of morality. Much of the book is occupied with demonstrating the necessity of a strong central authority to avoid the evil of discord and civil war. Beginning from a mechanistic understanding of human beings and their passions, Hobbes postulates what life would be like without government, a condition which he calls the state of nature. In that state, each person would have a right, or license, to everything in the world. This, Hobbes argues, would lead to a "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*). The description contains what has been called one of the best-known passages in English philosophy, which describes the natural state humankind would be in, were it not for political community.

“In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

In such states, people fear death and lack both the things necessary to commodious living, and the hope of being able to obtain them. So, in order to avoid it, people accede to a social contract and establish a civil society. According to Hobbes, society is a population and a sovereign authority, to whom all individuals in that society cede some right for the sake of protection. Power exercised by this authority cannot be resisted, because the protector's sovereign power derives from individuals' surrendering their own sovereign power for protection. The individuals are thereby the authors of all decisions made by the sovereign. There is no doctrine of separation of powers in Hobbes's discussion. According to Hobbes, the sovereign must control civil, military, judicial and ecclesiastical powers, even the words.

John Locke (29 August 1632 – 28 October 1704) was an English philosopher and physician, widely regarded as one of the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers and commonly known as the "Father of Liberalism." Considered one of the first of the British empiricists, following the tradition of Sir Francis Bacon, Locke is equally important to social contract theory. His work greatly affected the development of epistemology and political philosophy. His writings influenced Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, many Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, as well as the American Revolutionaries.

Locke's political theory was founded upon that of social contract. Unlike Thomas Hobbes, Locke believed that human nature is characterized by reason and tolerance. Like Hobbes, Locke believed that human nature allowed people to be selfish. This is apparent with the introduction of currency. In a natural state, all people were equal and independent, and everyone had a natural right to defend his "life, health, liberty, or possessions." Like Hobbes, Locke assumed that the sole right to defend in the state of nature was not enough, so people established a civil society to resolve conflicts in a civil way with help from government in a state of society. However, Locke

never refers to Hobbes by name and may instead have been responding to other writers of the day. Locke also advocated governmental separation of powers and believed that revolution is not only a right but an obligation in some circumstances.

Locke defines *the self* as "that conscious thinking thing, (whatever substance, made up of whether spiritual, or material, simple, or compounded, it matters not) which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends." He does not, however, ignore "substance," writing that "the body too goes to the making the man." In his *Essay*, Locke explains the gradual unfolding of this conscious mind. Arguing against both the Augustinian view of man as originally sinful and the Cartesian position, which holds that man innately knows basic logical propositions, Locke posits an 'empty mind', a *tabula rasa* which is shaped by experience; sensations and reflections being the two sources of *all* of our ideas.

Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* is an outline on how to educate this mind. Drawing on thoughts expressed in letters written to Mary Clarke and her husband about their son, he expresses the belief that education maketh the man, or, more fundamentally, that the mind is an "empty cabinet". Locke also wrote that "the little and almost insensible impressions on our tender infancies have very important and lasting consequences." He argued that the "associations of ideas" that one makes when young are more important than those made later because they are the foundation of the *self*; they are, put differently, what first mark the *tabula rasa*. In his *Essay*, in which both these concepts are introduced, Locke warns against, for example, letting "a foolish maid" convince a child that "goblins and sprites" are associated with the night for "darkness shall ever afterwards bring with it those frightful ideas, and they shall be so joined, that he can no more bear the one than the other." This theory came to be called *associationism*, going on to strongly influence 18th-century thought, particularly educational theory, as nearly every educational writer warned parents not to allow their children to develop negative associations.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (28 June 1712 – 2 July 1778) was a Genevan philosopher, writer and composer. His political philosophy influenced the progress of the Enlightenment throughout Europe, as well as aspects of the French Revolution and the development of modern political,

economic and educational thought. His *Discourse on Inequality* and *The Social Contract* are cornerstones in modern political and social thought. His *Emile, or On Education* (1762) is an educational treatise on the place of the individual in society. During the period of the French Revolution, Rousseau was the most popular of the philosophers among members of the Jacobin Club. He was interred as a national hero in the Panthéon in Paris, in 1794, 16 years after his death.

Rousseau based his political philosophy on contract theory and his reading of Hobbes. In common with other philosophers of the day, Rousseau looked to a hypothetical "state of nature" as a normative guide. Rousseau criticized Hobbes for asserting that since man in the "state of nature... has no idea of goodness he must be naturally wicked; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue". On the contrary, Rousseau holds that "uncorrupted morals" prevail in the "state of nature". Rousseau asserted that the stage of human development associated with what he called "savages" was the best or optimal in human development, between the less-than-optimal extreme of brute animals on the one hand and the extreme of decadent civilization on the other. "...[N]othing is so gentle as man in his primitive state, when placed by nature at an equal distance from the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man". Rousseau believed that the more men deviated from the state of nature, the worse off they would be. Espousing the belief that all degenerates in men's hands, Rousseau taught that men would be free, wise, and good in the state of nature and that instinct and emotion, when not distorted by the unnatural limitations of civilization, are nature's voices and instructions to the good life. Rousseau's "noble savage" stands in direct opposition to the man of culture. Rousseau believed that the savage stage was not the first stage of human development, but the third stage. Rousseau held that this third savage stage of human societal development was an optimum, between the extreme of the state of brute animals and animal-like "ape-men" on the one hand and the extreme of decadent civilized life on the other. Rousseau's view was that morality was not imbued by society, but rather "natural" in the sense of "innate". It could be seen as an outgrowth from man's instinctive disinclination to witness suffering, from which arise emotions of compassion or empathy. These are sentiments shared with animals, and whose existence even Hobbes acknowledged.

Rousseau's ideas of human development were highly interconnected with forms of mediation, or the processes that individual humans use to interact with themselves and others while using an

alternate perspective or thought process. According to Rousseau, these were developed through the innate perfectibility of humanity. These include a sense of self, morality, pity, and imagination. Rousseau's writings are purposely ambiguous concerning the formation of these processes to the point that mediation is always intrinsically part of humanity's development. An example of this is the notion that as an individual, one needs an alternative perspective to come to the realization that they are a 'self'. In the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* Rousseau argues that the arts and sciences have not been beneficial to humankind, because they arose not from authentic human needs but rather as a result of pride and vanity. Moreover, the opportunities they create for idleness and luxury have contributed to the corruption of man. He proposed that the progress of knowledge had made governments more powerful and had crushed individual liberty; and he concluded that material progress had actually undermined the possibility of true friendship by replacing it with jealousy, fear, and suspicion. In contrast to the optimistic view of other Enlightenment figures, for Rousseau, progress has been inimical to the well-being of humanity, that is, unless it can be counteracted by the cultivation of civic morality and duty. Only in civil society can man be ennobled—through the use of reason. Society corrupts men only insofar as the Social Contract has not *de facto* succeeded, as we see in contemporary society as described in the *Discourse on Inequality* (1754). Rousseau posits that the original, deeply flawed Social Contract (i.e., that of Hobbes), which led to the modern state, was made at the suggestion of the rich and powerful, who tricked the general population into surrendering their liberties to them and instituted inequality as a fundamental feature of human society. Rousseau's own conception of the Social Contract can be understood as an alternative to this fraudulent form of association.

Rousseau's philosophy of education concerns itself not with particular techniques of imparting information and concepts, but rather with developing the pupil's character and moral sense, so that he may learn to practice self-mastery and remain virtuous even in the unnatural and imperfect society in which he will have to live. In *Emile, or On Education* the hypothetical boy, Émile, is to be raised in the countryside, which, Rousseau believes, is a more natural and healthy environment than the city, under the guardianship of a tutor who will guide him through various learning experiences arranged by the tutor. Today we would call this the disciplinary method of "natural consequences". Rousseau felt that children learn right and wrong through experiencing the consequences of their acts rather than through physical punishment. The tutor will make sure

that no harm results to *Émile* through his learning experiences. Rousseau became an early advocate of developmentally appropriate education.

Although his ideas foreshadowed modern ones in many ways, in one way they do not: Rousseau was a believer in the moral superiority of the patriarchal family on the antique Roman model. Sophie, the young woman *Émile* is destined to marry, as his representative of ideal womanhood, is educated to be governed by her husband while *Émile*, as his representative of the ideal man, is educated to be self-governing. This is not an accidental feature of Rousseau's educational and political philosophy; it is essential to his account of the distinction between private, personal relations and the public world of political relations. The private sphere as Rousseau imagines it depends on the subordination of women, for both it and the public political sphere (upon which it depends) to function as Rousseau imagines it could and should. Rousseau anticipated the modern idea of the bourgeois nuclear family, with the mother at home taking responsibility for the household and for childcare and early education. Feminists, beginning in the late 18th century with Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, have criticized Rousseau for his confinement of women to the domestic sphere.