

## THE INFLUENCE OF ENLIGHTENMENT THINKERS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING

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**Abstract.** This article explores how the thinkers of the 18th-century Enlightenment shaped the foundations of critical thinking. It examines their contribution to rational inquiry, democratic values, the advancement of science, and the reform of education. Special attention is given to the rise of freedom of speech and the emergence of independent public opinion. The study uses historical, comparative, and philosophical approaches. It also addresses modern challenges such as the spread of misinformation, psychological manipulation, and the impact of technology on how people perceive information. The article highlights the continuing relevance of Enlightenment ideas and underscores the need for further strengthening of critical thinking in today's society.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, critical thinking, rational inquiry, democratic values, freedom of speech, science, education, information manipulation.

**Introduction.** The Enlightenment marked a turning point in human history. It shaped the way modern societies understand the world and themselves. Thinkers of this era sought to free the human mind from superstition and rigid dogmas, promoted science, and encouraged people to think independently (Israel, 2019). They challenged religious fanaticism, authoritarian power, and long-standing traditions.

Critical thinking became especially important during this period. It meant the ability to analyze information, question established norms, and form independent judgments. Enlightenment philosophers helped lay the groundwork for the rational worldview that later influenced the development of democracy, human rights, and scientific progress (Voltaire, 2019; Rousseau, 2020).

This article examines how Enlightenment ideas encouraged the growth of critical thinking, what methods the philosophers used, and how their ideas resonate today.

**Methods.** The study relies on several approaches: historical analysis of 18th-century philosophical works, comparative analysis of different Enlightenment thinkers, source analysis based on texts by Voltaire (2019), Diderot (2017), Rousseau (2020), and Kant (2018), as well as philosophical analysis exploring how Enlightenment ideas shaped science, politics, and education.

**Results.** One major achievement of the Enlightenment was the elevation of reason as the primary tool for understanding the world. René Descartes' famous statement "I think, therefore I am" stressed the importance of doubt and independent reasoning (as cited in Israel, 2019). Voltaire and Diderot opposed blind dogmatism and encouraged empirical thought, arguing that

traditions must be questioned when they contradict logic or common sense (Voltaire, 2019; Diderot, 2017). These ideas helped shape the scientific method.

Enlightenment thinkers also influenced democratic ideals. Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced the concept of popular sovereignty in “The Social Contract,” which shaped major political reforms (Rousseau, 2020). Immanuel Kant emphasized the importance of thinking for oneself, warning against blind obedience to authority (Kant, 2018).

The era contributed to the advancement of science and educational reform. Diderot and d’Alembert’s monumental “Encyclopédie” gathered and organized the intellectual achievements of the time (Diderot, 2017). Enlightenment thinkers criticized education based on memorization and dogma, advocating instead for logic, analysis, and empirical research—principles influencing the creation of modern universities (Israel, 2019).

Religious influence on society decreased, though not all Enlightenment thinkers rejected religion entirely. Voltaire argued that faith should remain a personal matter and opposed the church’s interference in politics (Voltaire, 2019). Diderot, expressing atheistic views, believed religion limited freedom of thought and hindered scientific progress (Diderot, 2017). Their ideas played a role in the rise of secularism and the separation of church and state.

The Enlightenment also strengthened freedom of speech and helped shape public opinion. Literature, journalism, and public debate became key tools for spreading ideas. Voltaire’s satirical works criticized despotism and religious intolerance, becoming a symbol of intellectual resistance (Voltaire, 2019). Diderot insisted that free discussion and the exchange of ideas were essential for social development (Diderot, 2017). These principles remain foundational in modern democracies and independent media systems.

**Discussion.** The influence of Enlightenment thinkers extends far beyond the 18th century. Their emphasis on reason and critical analysis helped advance science, reform education, and shape democratic institutions (Israel, 2019). However, the modern world still faces challenges such as misinformation, populism, radicalization, and the influence of technology on information consumption.

To address these issues, education must continue promoting critical thinking and source verification (Mustafoyeva, 2024; Utkirovna, 2024). Enlightenment principles remain vital in the digital age, where manipulation and disinformation can easily shape public consciousness.

**Conclusion.** Enlightenment thinkers played a key role in shaping critical thinking by elevating rational analysis, freedom of expression, and scientific inquiry. Their ideas helped lay the foundations of modern democracy, science, and education (Rousseau, 2020; Kant, 2018). In today’s information-saturated world, their legacy remains crucial. Strengthening analytical skills, improving educational systems, and supporting open public discourse are essential for preserving independent thought.

The Enlightenment not only transformed its own era but also laid the groundwork for humanity’s future intellectual progress.

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