The Enlightenment - Part 2 - The Philosophers

What was the enlightenment?

The Enlightenment was an intellectual and cultural movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It emphasised reason, logic, criticism and freedom of thought over faith and superstition.

What is political philosophy?

Political philosophy can be defined as philosophical reflection on how best to arrange our collective life through our political institutions: laws, monarchy, parliament etc. Political philosophers seek to establish basic principles that will, for example, justify a particular form of state, show that individuals have certain rights, or tell us how a society's wealth should be shared among its members. Some political philosophers have tried to justify current political institutions (conservatives); others have painted pictures of an ideal state that is very different from anything we have so far experienced (radicals).

Who were the main Enlightenment thinkers? – The Philosophers
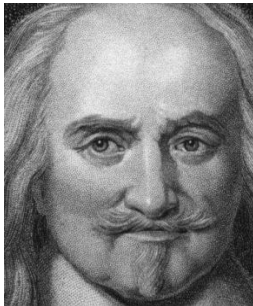
Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was an English philosopher. In his book *Leviathan* (1651) – by the way a Leviathan is a sea monster - Hobbes is famous for saying that man's life without strong government would be naturally "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Hobbes saw man as naturally selfish and immoral. Because of fear of death the individual will give away his rights to a king. The important point is that kings grew powerful not by **divine right** (the medieval concept) but by force. A king's power came not from above but from below, from his subjects. Since the king got his power from the people, the people had the right to overthrow him.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was a French mathematician and philosopher. Descartes was a **deist** who believed that God created the universe as a perfect clockwork mechanism that functioned thereafter without intervention. In *Discours de la Méthode* (1637), he advocated the systematic doubting of knowledge (**scepticism**), believing as Plato that sense perception and reason deceive us and that man cannot have real knowledge of nature. The only thing that he believed he could be certain of was that he was doubting, leading to his famous phrase *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am).

John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher who thought that the human mind at birth was a *tabula rasa* (blank tablet) that we are born without innate ideas, and that knowledge comes from experience derived from sense perception. His most important political book was *Two Treatises on Government* (1689). Locke argues men are born free and equal in rights. Government derives its authority from the agreement of the governed to be governed through a '**social contract**'. Powers of government are limited and maybe removed if poorly exercised. John Locke is considered to be the father of modern liberalism and was influential on the American revolutionaries.

Montesquieu (1689- 1755) Charles-Louis de Secondat, a French philosopher, his most influential work *L'esprit des lois* (1748) argued for the **separation of powers** in government. That a government's powers should be divided between the legislature (law maker), the executive (law enforcer), and the judiciary (law interpreter). These should be separate from and dependent upon each other so that the influence of any one power would not be able to exceed that of the other two. This was radical because it completely ignored the three Estates structure of the French Monarchy: the clergy, the aristocracy, and the common people, the essence of feudalism.

Voltaire (**1694 –1778) François-Marie Arouet,** a French writer and philosopher, Voltaire is remembered as a courageous polemicist who fought for **toleration**, **civil rights** – the right to a fair trial and freedom of religion – and who denounced the hypocrisies and injustices of the *ancien régime*. The *ancien régime* involved an unfair balance of power and taxes between the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate (the nobles), and the Third Estate (the commoners and middle class, who were burdened with most of the taxes). His famous defence of the right to free speech is often quoted: 'I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it'.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 –1778) a French philosopher, writer, and composer. In the complete opposite of Hobbes, Rousseau argued that man is naturally good but is corrupted by bad society 'Man was/is born free; and everywhere he is in chains' *Contract Social* (1762). Good government for Rousseau will be that which is of the greatest benefit to society as a whole. Rather than have a government which protects the wealth and the rights of the powerful few, government should be fundamentally based on the rights and equality of everyone, the 'General Will'. If any form of government does not look after the rights, **liberty**, and **equality** of everyone, then that government should be overthrown.

Diderot (1713 – 1784) and D'Alembert (1717 – 1783) – Les *Encyclopédistes.* The Encyclopedia (between 1751 and 1772) was in fact the collective effort of over one hundred French thinkers. The central purpose of the work was to take learning away from the influence of the Church. For the *Encyclopédistes* human improvement was not a religious issue, but simply a matter of mastering the natural world through science and technology and mastering human behaviour through an understanding of how individuals and societies work.

Thomas Paine (1737-1809) was an author, pamphleteer, radical, inventor, intellectual, revolutionary, and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. Born in England, Paine emigrated to the British American colonies in 1774 in time to participate in the American Revolution. His principal contribution was thr pamphlet Common Sense (1776), arguing for colonial America's independence from Great Britain. He also wrote the Rights of Man (1791) in which he argued for political rights for all men because of their natural equality and against all forms of **hereditary** government. Only a **democratic republic** could be trusted to protect the equal political rights of all men.

Activities

1. What is political philosophy? Explain the difference between conservative and radical political philosophers.

2. Check your understanding of the text by defining the meaning of the all 12 words/phrases in **bold.**

3. Design a 'mind map' of the main ideas of the political philosophers of the Enlightenment.

4. Write a webpage about one important Enlightenment philosopher. It does not have to be one of those listed above. You will need a research guideline sheet and access to a computer to help you with this task.