To understand the Enlightenment and fully appreciate its significance, we must review the state of the western world before the Scientific Revolution. Today most people believe the earth is a round planet orbiting in a solar system around a star known as the sun. We tend to accept this view without question. In the 1400s, people’s view of the world differed from ours. For most of that century, many Europeans believed the earth might be flat and that all the planets and stars and even the sun revolved around it. The centrality of the earth to the universe was a religious as much as a scientific concept for many, while the flat earth concept had existed since ancient times.

The ancient astronomer Ptolemy’s geocentric theory, that Earth was the center of the universe, remained accepted as fact over 1,200 years after his death. Nicolaus Copernicus, whose varied interests in theology, medicine, law, language, mathematics, and especially astronomy marked him as a true Renaissance man, observed the heavens and studied Ptolemy’s theories. Believing Ptolemy wrong, Copernicus took what he knew to be fact and developed a heliocentric theory where the sun and not the earth was at the center of the universe. Copernicus appears to have conceived his basic model before 1514 and spent the rest of his life developing his theory, which was published shortly before his death in 1543. His work, On the Revolutions, touched off the Scientific Revolution which continued well into the seventeenth century.

Among all the great figures of the Scientific Revolution, Sir Isaac Newton most importantly distilled the theories and discoveries of the Scientific Revolution from Copernicus to himself. His greatest work, Philosophia Naturalis Principia Mathematica, published in 1687, presented a reasonable, understandable, and demonstrable model for the workings of the universe, which was based on science and excluded theology. Newton’s concepts, such as his Law of Gravity, gave a predictable and comprehensible framework from which to view the world and beyond.
6.3.1: The Enlightenment

The ideas of the Scientific Revolution inspired people in many fields besides science. With Newton demonstrating rational explanations for the functions of the universe, philosophers were inspired to re-think humanity and its place in the universe. The Scientific Revolution, then, was at the root of the Enlightenment.

With the Enlightenment came a new spirit of thought and intellectual investigation. Old ideas and theories could be questioned and new ones proposed on virtually any subject. Acceptance of what had always been was no longer sufficient support for belief; instead, understanding with reasoned explanations and arguments were needed. Of the many great thinkers of the Enlightenment, including Rousseau, Voltaire, and Hume, the one whose works on politics and philosophy had the greatest direct impact on the revolutionary spirit in the Colonies was an Englishman, John Locke.

In 1690, two of Locke’s greatest works were published. In the first, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke explained that humans learn only from experience. We experience things through sensation, with our senses giving us information, and through reflection, with our pondering what we have learned through sensation. Experience then leads to simple ideas which lead to complex ones. Locke discounted the commonly-held idea that humans are born with innate knowledge. His revolutionary view was that we are born instead knowing nothing at all. For Locke, humans possessed no innate concepts, ideas, or morals. At birth, our minds are complete blanks, a tabula rasa, which by being completely empty can be filled with what we know to be true through experience.

His other great work of that year was Two Treatises of Government. In the first treatise, Locke rejected the theory of the divine right of kings; in the second, he explained his beliefs concerning government, democracy, and the rights of men. Locke believed that government should be for the benefit of the people, and if the government or the leader of the government failed in their duty to the people, then the people had the right to remove or overthrow that government. He believed that to safeguard against corruption and failure to serve the people, a government should have multiple branches with each serving to check the others. His ideas would continue to resonate long after his death in 1704 and would profoundly influence our Founding Fathers who used Locke’s ideas to frame their reasons for the American Revolution and thereby justify their cause. Locke’s ideas later formed the basis of the U. S. Constitution. From Locke came the concept that all people have the right to Life, Liberty, and Estate or Property.

6.3.2: The Enlightenment in America

The Enlightenment, with its ideas and ideals of human rights and the relationship of citizens and governments as expressed by such writers as Locke, formed the basis of thought of the American Revolution. Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and other Founding Fathers were influenced by the Enlightenment and took those ideals, that a government has a duty to the people, and used that as a lens through which to view the relationship between the American colonies and the British government of King George III. With the concept of a duty to the people firmly in mind, the failings of the British government to respond to the needs of the colony became more than mere points of contention and instead because causes for revolution. Thomas Paine, in his critical work Common Sense, made the case in clear language that spoke to the average colonist that equality was a natural condition for humans and having a king was not. Paine put forth the idea that while a king could be useful, there was no justification for a hereditary monarchy and ultimately, if the king did not see to the interest of his subjects, the subjects had no reason to have a king. The British government, according to Paine, had put its own interests ahead of the interests of the colonies,
thereby failing in its duty to the colonists. Further, whereas the colonies in their infancy had needed the guidance and protection of the British, now they were able to stand on their own. Indeed, the British government had evolved from promoting the growth of the colonies to prohibiting that growth and becoming an obstacle to their economic development by inhibiting trade between the colonies and other nations around the globe. By covering the economic realities as well as the higher principles of natural rights, Paine’s pamphlet appealed to both the practical-minded merchant and the principled philosopher. His writing was a hit and helped the colonists restless under British rule to understand exactly why continuing as colonies was not the solution to the situation.

The Enlightenment provided a moral justification for revolution and the end of British rule in the colonies—at least in the view of the revolutionary thinkers such as Franklin and Jefferson. Humanity’s natural rights could not be denied to any well-reasoned mind. The colonists had the right to determine for themselves where their loyalties lay and what form their government would take. They had the right to be heard, to have their concerns addressed in a way not possible for the British over the seas. Yet, the break was not easy. Many in the colonies, even if they felt their rights had been violated, remained loyal to England and hoped for a reconciliation. The relationship was often described in terms of a parent and child. To the leaders of the revolution, the child had grown up and was ready to have its independence, with a new government, one not seen before that would be guided by the principles of the Enlightenment.

6.3.3: The Great Awakening

The Great Awakening was a religious revival in the American colonies triggered by a belief among Calvinists that the spiritual life of the colonists was endangered. With a focus on the material rather than the spiritual, the pursuit of wealth rather than the pursuit of a good Christian life, the lifestyle choices of the colonists alarmed and then invigorated evangelical ministers, launching the Great Awakening. Ultimately, ministers from both sides of the Atlantic would inspire each other and be involved in this spiritual revival.

The Church of England—The Anglican Church

Like much of Europe, England had been a Catholic country until the Protestant Reformation. Henry VIII had at first defended the Catholic Church from the criticisms of Martin Luther, but later broke with the Catholic Church in order to divorce Ann Boleyn and, in 1534, declared himself the head of the Church of England. Unlike other Protestant movements, in which churches were formed based on the ideas of their founders such as Luther or Calvin, the Anglican Church alternated in concept from Catholicism to Protestantism, depending on what religious views were held by the current monarch and his or her advisors, since the Church and State were then tied together. The result was a church caught in the middle, blending Catholicism and Protestantism. The Anglican Church remained Catholic in its administrative structure and in the ritualized nature of its services, with Protestantism influencing its architecture, theology, and conduct of services. Because the Anglicans retained a detailed liturgical structure, any Anglican, whether in England or in the colonies, would know what Scriptures would be read and what prayers would be said on any given Sunday, as all Anglican churches followed a common guide. For many, this formal, predictable style of worship did not meet their spiritual needs. Indeed, some felt England to be almost a spiritual desert.

The Wesley Brothers and Their Conversion

The Wesleys attended Oxford and, in 1729, Charles founded the Holy Club, a group of students who were devout in
their religious practices. In fact, they were absolutely methodical in the way they carried on their religious devotions and other activities, a practice which led to their nickname, Methodist. The name eventually served to identify the Protestant denomination they founded. The Wesleys, who practiced what they preached, believed in public service and missionary work, even going to the colonies in the 1730s as missionaries. On their return to England, John and Charles encountered Moravian passengers, Moravians being a Protestant group with German roots extending back to Jan Huss. This encounter led the brothers to associate with Moravians in England and to read the writings of Martin Luther, in particular his *Justification by Faith*. In 1738, within just a few days of each other, both brothers experienced a deep religious conversion which led them to preach of a personal, emotional relationship with God; this preaching would carry over to the colonies.

George Whitefield, a Powerful Voice in New England and the Colonies

George Whitefield, who attended Oxford, also joined the Holy Club and was influenced by the Wesleys. Still, for Whitefield, not Luther but Calvin was the key to his conversion. Another great influence on Whitefield was Jonathan Edwards. Whitefield read Edwards’s *A Faithful Narrative*, and found it inspirational. For the Wesleys and Whitefield, the old Anglican Sunday services no longer sufficed, so they began preaching revivals and in the open air. They preached to people who did not normally attend church and to anyone who listened. They believed the Holy Spirit could be felt at work in their hearts; this very personal, emotional religious experience was also felt by those whom they converted. As one might expect, these services were not the calm, quiet services of the traditional Anglican Church but emotional services during which the congregation openly wept, especially when listening to Whitefield. Whitefield became famous...
on both sides of the Atlantic for his sermons, which he preferred to deliver in the open air. Whitefield’s preaching was considered remarkable for several reasons: his voice carried for a tremendous distance, enabling him to be clearly heard by thousands; his style was such as to impress even those who, like Benjamin Franklin, did not agree with his theology; and he was able to stir up a storm of emotions in his audience so that they were often left weeping.

He preached daily, usually multiple times a day, for the rest of his life, inspiring many to a religious awakening, and inspired many who, if they did not become Methodists, at least experienced the Great Awakening. Unfortunately, while many welcomed this new evangelical form of worship, others did not. In the Colonies, those who preferred to stay with their old religious practices were called the Old Lights, while those who favored the new were called New Lights. The division between Old and New Lights crossed denominational boundaries, for while the Methodists were in the forefront of the Awakening, this was a spiritual matter rather than a doctrinal one. People could stay with their own church and still have the same deeply personal, internal conversion as the Wesleys. Even so, new denominations, including Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists, did take hold in the Colonies even where they were prohibited by law. All these denominations originated in the Old World and flowered in the Colonies powered by the zeal of the Awakening, thus changing the face of Colonial religion.

6.3.4: The Great Awakening Begins in the Middle Colonies

In the 1730s the Great Awakening began with the Tennents, a Presbyterian family of preachers who reached out to Presbyterians in their home of Pennsylvania and on into New Jersey. The Tennents and others were so successful in their revivals that they led to the founding of Princeton and to the inspiration of Jonathan Edwards. Their revivals spread from Pennsylvania northwards into New England, striking a cord with the Congregationalists or Puritans and Baptists there, leading ministers in New England to have their own revivals by the 1740s.

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards, a Connecticut preacher well educated in theology and philosophy, and who read Locke and Newton, came to be one of the most important theologians of his day. Inspired by Gilbert Tennent, Edwards was preaching successful revivals by 1735, when, tragically, his uncle committed suicide due to his despair concerning salvation. This proved a temporary setback to Edwards’s revivals. As Edwards was temporarily quieted, George Whitefield arrived from England in 1739, full of revival spirit. Just as Edwards writing had inspired Whitefield, Whitefield’s emotional preaching inspired Edwards. Edwards greatly admired Whitefield who, as we might expect, touched him emotionally and made him weep. Edwards’s own style was far more restrained than Whitefield’s. Edwards reached his listeners through reason rather than through sermons infused with overt emotion, though the effect of his sermons on his audience could be very emotional. Edwards is most famous for his sermon entitled Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. When he delivered this sermon at a meeting in Enfield, Connecticut in 1741, the reaction was overwhelming, with people crying out for salvation. Weeping, shouting, and fainting all occurred at these meetings in a tide of passion never before seen in Colonial churches. The Great Awakening in the Colonies was felt everywhere, yet New England stands out, due in no small part to Edwards. Conversions increased as church attendance exploded, with very few, if any, who did not know someone who had recently converted in this time of religious fever.

6.3.5: Before You Move On...
Key Concepts

The Scientific Revolution led to the Enlightenment. In both, an emphasis on reason was key. Ideas from the Enlightenment concerning human nature and that of government put forth by philosophers such as John Locke helped to inspire the American Revolution and shape the United States. The Great Awakening, a spiritual revival felt both in Britain and the colonies, focused on an individual’s personal relationship with God. The Tennents, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield all were key figures in the Great Awakening in the colonies, which resulted in the spread of new evangelical Protestant denominations.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

What are the three rights of every person as listed by Locke?

Answer

Life, Liberty, and Estate

Exercise \(\PageIndex{2}\)

Early Methodists were called that because they were so methodical.

a. True

b. False

Answer

a

Exercise \(\PageIndex{3}\)

The Wesleys began as Anglicans but were inspired to conversion by the writing of whom?

Answer

Martin Luther

Exercise \(\PageIndex{4}\)

Unlike with the Wesleys, who was key to Whitefield’s conversion?

Answer

John Calvin