

Modern Philosophy – Lecture 4 Study Guide

Title: The French Enlightenment

Key Themes

- **Modernizing justice:** From trials by ordeal and benevolent torture to presumption of innocence and rational evidence.
 - **Changing views of God:** From theism (emotional, interventionist) → deism (rational, scientific) → agnosticism (questioning God's existence).
 - **Voltaire's project:** Attack intellectual and political authoritarianism; promote toleration, reason, and cosmopolitanism.
 - **English influence:** Locke (toleration), Bacon (science), Newton (natural laws) inspire Voltaire and French thinkers.
 - **Encyclopédie movement:** Diderot & D'Alembert collect and democratize knowledge; applied reason to every domain.
 - **Enlightenment vision:** Human progress through reason, science, liberty, tolerance, and applied knowledge.
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Historical & Intellectual Context

- **1716:** Last witch burnings in England (Mary & Elizabeth Hicks). Symbol of transition away from medieval superstition.
- **Traditional justice:** Rooted in scripture and divine authority (Exodus → “eye for an eye”; Romans → “vengeance is mine”).
- **Medieval ordeals:** Hot iron, dunking suspected witches – presumption of guilt, testing innocence through divine signs.
- **Benevolent torture (St. Augustine):** Justified as saving souls by coercion; Montaigne critiques as cruel conjecture.
- **Philosophical shift:** Modern thinkers emphasize *evidence, reason, proportionality*, and presumption of innocence.

Modernizing Justice

- **Presumption of innocence:** Burden of proof on prosecution; beyond *reasonable doubt*.
- **Human nature debate:**
- **Sinful by nature** → presumption of guilt makes sense.
- **Blank slate (Locke)** → individuals born neutral; guilt must be proven.
- **Sources of justice debated:**
- God's revelation.
- Tradition & institutions.
- King's arbitrary will.
- **Modern answer:** reason, logic, evidence, science.

New Conceptions of God

- **Theism:** Personal, emotional God — angry, loving, changeable.
- **Deism:** Rational creator, scientific order, natural laws. God as cosmic architect.
- **Agnosticism:** Suspends belief — “we do not know.” Jefferson: “*Question with boldness the existence of God...*”
- **Implication:** Religion should be rational, individual, free of blind obedience and fear.

Voltaire (1694–1778)

Life & Exile

- Sharp wit, attacked church & aristocracy; imprisoned in Bastille, exiled to England.
- Encountered Bacon, Locke, Newton; admired English toleration, politics, science.

Letters Concerning the English Nation (1733)

- **Religion:** Focus on Quakers → egalitarian, plain, tolerant; contrast with French Catholic hierarchy.
 - **Commerce:** Royal Exchange in London as model of peaceful cooperation: *“Infidels” are only bankrupts.*
 - **Politics:** England’s Glorious Revolution → liberty after civil war; lessons for France.
 - **Science:** Praises inoculation (learned from Circassians & Chinese), cosmopolitan openness.
 - **Heroes:** Greatest men are not conquerors but thinkers: *Bacon, Locke, Newton.*
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Diderot & D’Alembert – Encyclopédie (1751–1772)

- Aim: Collect and democratize all human knowledge.
 - Articles on science, technology, philosophy, religion, politics — practical and theoretical.
 - Included diagrams of crafts (tanneries, shipbuilding) alongside philosophical entries.
 - Dedication to Bacon, Locke, Newton → cosmopolitanism over nationalism.
 - Sparked salons, reading groups, mass literacy → spread of Enlightenment ideas.
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Cosmopolitanism & Cultural Curiosity

- **Montaigne:** *On Cannibals* — relativism, critique of European barbarism.
 - **Montesquieu:** *Persian Letters* — learning from Persian culture.
 - **Diderot:** *Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage* — sexual customs in Tahiti challenge French repression.
 - **General trend:** Learn from other cultures; critique one’s own.
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Enlightenment Vision

- **Intellectual revolution:** Bacon, Descartes, Locke reject authority, elevate reason.
 - **Natural sciences:** Newton → rational order of nature; fuels Industrial Revolution.
 - **Medicine & technology:** Empirical advances modernize health and industry.
 - **Individualism:** Each person has reason; political liberalism and capitalism follow.
 - **Optimism of progress:** Wealth, freedom, longevity, happiness possible for all.
 - **Radical activism:**
 - Voltaire: “*Écrasez l’infâme*” (crush the infamous thing = authoritarian religion).
 - Diderot: “*Men will not be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.*”
 - **Condorcet:** Vision of a future where reason alone is master.
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Important Quotes

“It’s putting a very high price on one’s conjectures... to have a man roasted alive because of them.” – Montaigne

“Question with boldness the existence of God...” – Jefferson

*“The Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together, as though they all professed the same religion, and give the name of infidel to none but bankrupts.” – Voltaire, **Letters on England***

“The greatest men in history – Bacon, Locke, Newton.” – Voltaire

“Men will not be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.” – Diderot

Summary

The French Enlightenment marked the cultural flowering of modern philosophy's principles. Old practices of ordeal, torture, and authoritarian religion gave way to rational justice, presumption of innocence, and critical rethinking of God. Voltaire, exiled in England, imported Bacon, Locke, and Newton into France, championing toleration, cosmopolitan commerce, and reason. His *Letters on England* contrasted English liberty with French hierarchy, praised Quaker egalitarianism, and honored Newton as the true hero of humanity. The *Encyclopédie*, led by Diderot and D'Alembert, embodied Enlightenment ideals by democratizing knowledge and linking theory to practice. Cosmopolitan curiosity drove thinkers to learn from foreign cultures, challenging national chauvinism. Together, these developments crystallized the Enlightenment vision: human beings, guided by reason, science, and liberty, could progress toward freedom and happiness, overthrowing the twin tyrannies of throne and altar.

Questions for Review

1. How did trials by ordeal reflect medieval views of justice, and why did modern thinkers reject them?
 2. Contrast the theistic and deistic conceptions of God. Why did deism appeal to Enlightenment thinkers?
 3. How did Montaigne challenge the doctrine of benevolent torture?
 4. Why did Voltaire admire the Quakers, and what rhetorical strategy did he use in describing them?
 5. What lesson did Voltaire draw from the Royal Exchange in London?
 6. Why did Voltaire rank Bacon, Locke, and Newton as the greatest men in history?
 7. What was the significance of the *Encyclopédie* project, and why was it dedicated to English thinkers?
 8. How did cosmopolitan comparisons (Montaigne on cannibals, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Diderot on Tahiti) challenge European assumptions?
 9. What does Condorcet's vision of a rational future reveal about Enlightenment optimism?
 10. How did Enlightenment thinkers see knowledge as a tool for human progress?
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Key Terms (Quick Reference)

- **Trial by Ordeal** — medieval practice testing guilt through divine intervention.
 - **Benevolent Torture** — Augustine's idea of coercion for salvation.
 - **Presumption of Innocence** — modern legal principle requiring proof beyond reasonable doubt.
 - **Deism** — belief in a rational creator, discovered through science, not revelation.
 - **Voltaire** — French Enlightenment leader; author of *Letters on England*.
 - **Encyclopédie** — massive French project (Diderot, D'Alembert) to collect and spread knowledge.
 - **Cosmopolitanism** — openness to learning from other cultures.
 - **Écrasez l'infâme** — Voltaire's call to crush authoritarian religion.
 - **Condorcet's Vision** — future of free men governed only by reason.
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