



Rationalism and Enlightenment's Spirit: The Leading Spirit of the French Enlightenment Philosophy in the 18th Century

Racionalismo e Espírito Iluminista: O Espírito Principal da Filosofia Iluminista Francesa no Século XVIII

Khue Dinh PHAM

Doctor of philosophy

Hanoi Architectural University, Việt Nam.

Email: khuepd@hau.edu.vn

Trang DO

Associate Professor, Doctor of philosophy

Faculty of Fundamental Sciences, Van Lang University,

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

E-mail: trang.do@vlu.edu.vn

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4871-1368>

Abstract

Permeating 18th-century French Enlightenment philosophy was a profound rationalist spirit and Enlightenment ideals. This intellectual movement emerged from efforts to disengage from organized religion and the church, asserting an unwavering faith in the boundless power of reason and scientific knowledge over the forces of theocracy and secular powers. This article delves into an analysis of the rationalist and Enlightenment elements within 18th-century French Enlightenment philosophy, aiming to claim its position as the prevailing spirit and the driving force of the Enlightenment-era. By examining these elements, we can draw both the values and limitations of this philosophical movement on the development of the history of human thought.

Keywords: French enlightenment, rationalist spirit, enlightening ideas

Resumo:

A permear a filosofia iluminista francesa do século XVIII estava um profundo espírito racionalista e ideais iluministas. Este movimento intelectual emergiu dos esforços para se desligar da religião organizada e da igreja, afirmando uma fé inabalável no poder ilimitado da razão e do conhecimento científico sobre as forças da teocracia e dos poderes seculares. Este artigo investiga uma análise dos elementos racionalistas e iluministas da filosofia iluminista francesa do século XVIII, com o objetivo de reivindicar a sua posição como o espírito predominante e a força motriz da era do Iluminismo. Ao examinar estes elementos, podemos traçar tanto os valores como as limitações deste movimento filosófico no desenvolvimento da história do pensamento humano.

Palavras-chave: Iluminismo francês, espírito racionalista, ideias iluministas

INTRODUCTION

The rationalist spirit and Enlightenment ideals were hallmarks of the Enlightenment era, a period that laid the intellectual groundwork for the French Revolution of 1789 (Conrad, 2012). Amidst this context, these ideologies emerged as a powerful force, enabling the bourgeoisie to manifest their positive characteristics in response to the new demands of history. This spirit became the wellspring of strength and the ideological foundation for capitalism during its early stages. As a result, capitalism continued to develop, and came into a global system (Warman *et al.*, 2016). Even today, capitalism remains a dominant force, holding sway over most of the world's leading developed nations. This serves as evidence for the 18th-century rationalist spirit and Enlightenment ideals as the values that merit continued succeeding, disseminating, and elaborating (Zuckert, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rationalist spirit

The 18th-century French Enlightenment was characterized by a pervasive rationalist spirit, with rationalism serving as the foundation of Enlightenment philosophy. In its worldview dimension, *rationalism* (rationalisme) embodies a profound belief in reason, in the self-evident truths revealed by nature's light, and in the boundless capacity of human rationality. In the realm of ethics, the rationalist spirit manifests as a fight against the authority of the Church, which had long taken religious faith to be superior to reason (Do, 2023, p. 34). It's worth praising that the Enlightenment thinkers endeavored to separate reason from its entanglement with religion. Instead, rationalism aligned the subject matter of scientific inquiry with the rigorous principles of reason, thereby providing a powerful impetus for the advancement of scientific knowledge. The rationalist inclinations of Enlightenment thinkers are evident in their pronouncements. Pierre Bayle argued, "Religion and truth do not necessarily have to be bound together. Religion should only intervene when reason proves incapable of resolving difficulties. In other words, faith in God need only be applied to that which is truly irrational" (Phung, 1991, p. 343). Similarly, La Mettrie declared, "Whatever is not derived from nature itself, whatever is not a phenomenon, cause, or effect, does not merit the slightest concern of philosophy" (Wahl, 2006, p. 63). These statements famously showed their rationalist stance. Diderot's epistemology, in particular, bears a distinctly rationalist nuance. He posited that, the entirety of human knowledge (encompassing memory, reasoning, and imagination) falls under the scope of reason (entendement) – reason in distinction from sensation. Rousseau also exhibited a rationalist spirit, maintaining that, "at the age of reason, man must determine himself the means of his own subsistence" (Rousseau, 2004, p. 53).

The Enlightenment thinkers commonly held that, it is through the illumination of reason that humanity can liberate itself from the shackles, restrictions, and constraints of despotism; only through reason can individuals transcend the dogmatic imposition and attain true knowledge. True freedom, they contended, can only be realized when individuals are emancipated from all forms of tyranny, both internal and external. For, as Nguyen Manh Tuong remarked, "Freedom is a gift from Heaven, and every individual has the right to enjoy it when endowed with reason" (Nguyen, 1994, p.111).

Enlightenment ideals

In rationalism tradition, Enlightenment thinkers placed an emphasis on promoting and disseminating scientific knowledge among the masses. This unwavering commitment to the pursuit of knowledge became a defining characteristic of the Enlightenment era. The very term "Enlightenment" signifies the intellectual movements and knowledge-dissemination activities that emerged during the Early Modern period. Enlightenment, often referred to as "illumination" or "light," came to be synonymous with knowledge itself (Bouquet, 2004, p. 39), (Schmidt, 1996, p.87).

Since ancient times, Westerners have associated enlightenment or illuminating with metaphorical meanings, alluding to human intellectual endeavors and rational pursuits. In this context, enlightenment or 'light' stands in stark contrast to all that hinders and constrains human progress. The spiritual shackles of ignorance, superstition, and prejudice, among others, were the evils that 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers were determined to eradicate.

The Enlightenment tradition traces its roots back to ancient Greece, embodied in Plato's captivating allegory of 'The Cave'. In this story, Plato metaphorically depicts the light emanating from outside the cave as the representation of truth. This light stands in stark contrast to mere illusions; the shadows projected on the cave walls, deceiving individuals into misconstruing objective reality. During the Middle Ages, the term *light* (*lumière* in French) acquired a religious connotation, becoming associated with divine grace and thus linked to God. The light came to encompass two distinct meanings: (1) *natural light* (*lumière naturelle*), signifying the activities of the intellect, and (2) *revealed light* (*lumière révélée*), carrying religious implications (Schmidt, 1996). Later, Enlightenment thinkers endeavored to detach the concept of light from its medieval context and reclaim its ancient Enlightenment significance.

This Enlightenment tradition was further inherited and revitalized by 18th-century French philosophers in a new historical landscape. Renowned Enlightenment figures such as J. Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, to name but a few, placed Enlightenment ideals at the forefront, permeating their entire philosophical doctrines. On a theoretical level, they provided convincing arguments for the necessity of pursuing Enlightenment ideals. In practice, they tirelessly championed the realization of these

ideals. Their unwavering efforts transformed the 18th century into an era marked by "increasing brilliance, compared to which previous centuries were nothing but sheer darkness" (Bouquet, 2004, p. 9).

A necessity to pursue enlightenment

The Enlightenment thinkers' advocacy for the Enlightenment project was firmly grounded in a multifaceted rationale that encompassed the innate goodness of human nature, the oppressive nature of existing social structures, and the transformative power of science and knowledge (Golinski, 2011). As in a remark on Holbach, "Like all other 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers, Holbach firmly believed that people are born neither good nor evil, and that their shortcomings stem from their surroundings, primarily political conditions" (Institute Of Philosophy, 1962, p. 154). Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued, "Man is naturally good, and it is society that corrupts him" (Rousseau, 2004, p. 162). Through this observation, the Enlightenment thinkers contended that the prevailing societal structures, with their inherent constraints and injustices, were the primary cause behind human corruption. They proposed that by illuminating with the light of knowledge and reason to reform society and to perfect the individual (Do, 2023), (De Dijn, 2012).

The Enlightenment figures seem to present the second argument on the necessity of 'enlightening people'. In the first argument, it is the human nature that demands the light of knowledge. In the same light, Enlightenment figures believed that the nature of existing societal structures lead to human corruption. The Enlightenment thinkers recognized the pervasive influence of theocracy and absolutism on 18th-century society. They viewed these institutions as shackles that bound individuals in ignorance and oppression. Victor Hugo, in his novel "Les Misérables," vividly depicted the plight of individuals trapped within the suffocating grip of these oppressive forces. Hugo wrote,

His father-in-law was crippled by the landlord, his grandfather was imprisoned by the priest, and his father was hanged by the king, yet he went off to fight, to rebel, and to die for the landlord, the priest, and the old king. (Nguyen, 1994, pp. 37-45)

It was a time when people had to endure extreme material poverty and spiritual bondage. The Enlightenment thinkers believed that only through the illuminating power of Enlightenment could humanity break free from the shackles of poverty, both material and spiritual. They envisioned Enlightenment as the key to empowering individuals with knowledge and self-awareness, enabling them to liberate themselves from societal oppression and reclaim their inherent dignity.

As sympathy proponents of rationalism, the Enlightenment thinkers took the transformative power of science and knowledge as third argument for the necessity of enlightenment. They believed that scientific advancements held the potential to revolutionize societal structures and usher in an era of progress and prosperity. They tirelessly advocated for the widespread dissemination of scientific

knowledge, insisting its transformative potential for individual and societal advancement. The Enlightenment thinkers were convinced that only through the cultivation of intellect and the acquisition of scientific knowledge could humanity attain true freedom and equality.

Actualizing enlightenment ideals

The Enlightenment thinkers' pursuit of Enlightenment ideals was marked by unwavering dedication and unwavering resolve. They relentlessly employed their literary prowess, engaging in prolific writing and impassioned speeches, to disseminate their ideas and galvanize support for their cause. Undeterred by the threat of persecution, they formed alliances, providing mutual support and encouragement amidst a hostile environment. Despite facing imprisonment and exile, as exemplified by the experiences of Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau, these intrepid thinkers remained unyielding in their pursuit of Enlightenment ideals. Their unwavering commitment to their principles earned them the well-deserved moniker of "fighting philosophers" of the era. As aptly captured in the *Encyclopédie*,

Philosophers often... avoid others and the world also avoids them. But our philosopher knows how to divide his time between a life of solitude and a life of socializing with others. The philosopher is full of humanity, eager for honor and honesty. His character and style of doing things are always orderly and follow reason. (Nguyen, 1994, p. 370)

This era of emphasis on the 'active engagement' of Enlightenment thinkers marked a significant departure from the traditional image of the philosopher. Voltaire further articulated this notion of active engagement, asserting,

The disposition of a philosopher is not to pity the unfortunate but to serve the unfortunate... The true philosopher breaks open wasteland into farmland, increases the number of plows, finds work for the poor, allows people to get rich, encourages marriage, builds for orphans, does not complain about necessary taxes, creates conditions for the people to pay taxes cheerfully. The philosopher does not wait for others, but helps them as much as possible. (Nguyen, 1994, p. 372).

This proves that, in the age of enlightenment, they were both true philosophers and social activists who worked hard for their ideals.

The 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers were acutely aware of their self-proclaimed historical mission: to disseminate the 'light' of knowledge. As aptly captured in an observation about these philosophers,

The judge judges, the philosopher teaches the judge what is justice and injustice. The soldier defends the homeland, the philosopher teaches the soldier what the homeland is. The king orders the people, the philosopher teaches the king the origin and limits of his power. (Nguyen, 1994, p. 332)

Their Enlightenment endeavors sparked a powerful ripple effect, resonating with progressive forces

within society. The relentless pursuit of Enlightenment by these thinkers yielded profound outcomes. It was observed,

In Europe, a class of men had been formed who were less concerned with discovering truth than with disseminating it; men who devoted themselves wholeheartedly to pursuing prejudices to their hiding places, where the clergy, the schools, the governments, the old corporations had acquired and defended them, to expose their brilliance and eradicate the people's errors rather than to seek to push back the boundaries of human knowledge. They fought for the sake of truth, using in turn all the weapons of erudition, philosophy, spirit, and great creative ability to serve reason. Never weary of proclaiming the independence of reason, the right of free thought as a law, the liberation of man; tirelessly standing up against all the crimes of fanaticism and despotism; pursuing in religion, in administration, in customs, in laws everything that bore the mark of oppression, of harshness, of barbarity; ordering, in the name of nature, kings, knights, administrators, prefects, to respect human blood. (Nguyen, 1994, p. 332).

The Enlightenment thinkers left an indelible mark on history, shaping a vibrant reality through their tireless dissemination of 'light'. Their contributions played a pivotal role in shaping the course of history, both in France and globally. Their endeavors laid the foundation for the early development of modern capitalism.

While the Enlightenment endeavors of these philosophers awakened progressive humanity, they simultaneously faced a myriad of challenges, obstacles, and opposition from opposing forces. The secular and theocratic powers sought to eradicate or neutralize the Enlightenment thinkers' weapons of struggle (Elise, 2009). They employed all their available might to prohibit the circulation or censor and mutilate books, newspapers, and publications with progressive ideas. In their pursuit of Enlightenment, these thinkers often operated secretly, constantly subject to stringent censorship, restrictions, surveillance, arrest, and arbitrary imprisonment. Despite these formidable challenges, the publication of anti-feudal and anti-religious works stands as a testament to their unwavering struggle. The monumental *Encyclopédie*, accompanied by the intellectual movement known as Encyclopedism, stands as the crowning achievement of the Enlightenment thinkers' efforts to realize their ideals. As aptly captured in Icher's (2004) observations, "The Encyclopedia is more than a book. It is a rebellion... All of Europe follows it". And,

This progress was not brought about by theology (...) [but] could only be brought about by free reason. (...) For the first time, the Encyclopedists established the human sciences, no longer linked to metaphysics, with a body of research of an abstract and speculative nature, but by research through the sciences and all the works of man to understand man more fully. (Icher, 2004, p. 437).

The *Encyclopédie's* strength lay in its composition of a vast collective of dedicated scientists and philosophers, united in their views on general issues and, above all, sharing a common Enlightenment ideal. In this context, the *Encyclopédie's* emergence served as a potent weapon against the prevailing feudal and church's forces. The *Encyclopédie* thus stands as a compelling testament to how the 18th-century

French Enlightenment thinkers actualized their ideals, granting humanity the right to access knowledge and enlightenment.

To realize their Enlightenment ideals, the Enlightenment thinkers wielded powerful weapons: advocacy for freedom of speech and freedom of thought. These essential freedoms served as means for disseminating the light of scientific knowledge throughout society. As Voltaire eloquently expressed, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" (Icher, 2004, p. 198). Freedom of speech later emerged as one of the most sacred and cherished human rights enshrined in the French Revolution's the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen during. This achievement from struggles marked a triumphant transformation of social reality, embodying the Enlightenment ideals of the 18th century.

Recognizing education as the most effective means of disseminating knowledge and awakening individuals and society, the Enlightenment thinkers placed great emphasis on its role in their Enlightenment endeavors. In the belief that "man is born good in the state of nature, [...] but later, reasonable man is the product of a good education" (Rousseau, 2004, p. 455), and that, "in the state of nature man is natural", but more importantly, "humankind is good by nature but is corrupted by society" (Rousseau, 2004, p. 432), Rousseau and his Enlightenment fellows asserted the need for the reform and transformation of human beings through authentic education. The Enlightenment thinkers condemned the prevailing French education system, for its failure to foster physical and intellectual development or nurturing the inherent positive qualities of human beings.

Along with their critique of the old educational system, they advocated for the necessity of educational reform. Rousseau's radical educational ideas highlighted the profound humanistic values that an enlightened education could impart to humanity. His vision centered on an education that cultivates natural happiness, champions freedom and equality, and nurtures individuals who can fulfil their natural potential, as exemplified by the character of Émile. These core values lie at the heart of the Enlightenment ideals embraced by the 18th-century philosophers.

DISCUSSION

Historical values of the rationalism and enlightenment ideals of the 18th century French enlightenment

On the first value, the 18th-century French Enlightenment thinkers made a groundbreaking contribution by severing the link between reason and religion. In contrast to the medieval tradition, where reason was viewed in relation to religious faith, the Enlightenment thinkers elevated reason to an entirely new status: the indispensable tool for seeking truth (scientific knowledge) (Haakonssen, 2008, p. 32). This

represented a pivotal contribution to historical progress. By firmly anchoring all objects of scientific inquiry within the rigorous principles of reason, they ushered in a turning point. Their endeavors fueled remarkable advancements in scientific knowledge and philosophical thought.

On the second value, liberated from the constraints of religion and the dominance of feudal forces and the Church, rationalism and Enlightenment ideals featured the image of the individual in capitalist society, establishing a tradition of thought that glorified the light of science and faith in reason (Lough, 1985). This mode of thinking became the norm and gained widespread acceptance in modern capitalist society. It stands as evidence to the profound influence of the 18th-century French Enlightenment thinkers.

With the secular and individualistic character of Enlightenment ethics, the spirit of liberty and enlightenment bestowed upon humanity genuine freedom and equality, empowering individuals to reason and make their own choices (Swingewood, 1970). The Enlightenment thinkers' endeavors liberated humanity from the shackles and restraints of society, bringing about an era of freedom and equality attainable by all rational beings. This momentous achievement stemmed from honoring reason and human nature. Also, by embracing the inherent goodness of human nature (as embraced by Rousseau), the Enlightenment thinkers harnessed reason and societal progress towards the ultimate goal of fully actualizing the innate goodness within humanity. They asserted that through true education, all individuals could be virtuous. These transformative ideals illustrated the positive constructions of the Enlightenment thinkers amidst the burgeoning development of capitalism and its establishment of dominance across all spheres. This period also witnessed the historical emergence of the bourgeoisie and their constructive role in society. Consequently, the norms and values that emerged from the spirit of rationalism and Enlightenment ideals were inherently positive and universal, representing the hallmark of progress in the new era. Containing a multitude of positive characteristics, the rationalism and Enlightenment ideals of 18th-century France were embraced and further developed by subsequent generations of thinkers in the context of evolving historical conditions.

Limitations of the rationalism and enlightenment ideals of 18th century French enlightenment philosophy

Firstly, the overemphasis on reason and Enlightenment ideals as the sole means of liberating humanity from ignorance, shackles, and constraints, coupled with the equating knowledge with morality, led to the misconception that individuals with rationality and scientific knowledge are inherently moral, and vice versa. This narrow perspective failed to prove the validity of these ideologies.

Secondly, despite their efforts to separate reason from the dominance of the Church and religion,

the French Enlightenment thinkers remained largely within the confines of idealism and a social utopian idea. Their excessive focus on enlightenment and knowledge dissemination as the primary means for societal transformation and individual advancement reflected an idealistic worldview. The Enlightenment thinkers' explanations of human origins, social structures, and the laws governing them were rooted in idealism. Consequently, their proposed methods for social reform were often idealistic, impractical, and partial.

CONCLUSION

Emerging from the specific historical context of 18th-century France, the spirit of rationalism and Enlightenment ideals endorsed by the French Enlightenment thinkers represented the ideology of the bourgeoisie, the most progressive and dynamic social force of the era. In the lead-up to the French Revolution of 1789, these ideals embodied a “popularly active”, establishing new norms and expectations for individuals in the emerging society. The Enlightenment thinkers tirelessly advocated for progress and selflessly dedicated themselves to the cause of enlightenment. The spirit of rationalism and Enlightenment ideals, which they advocated and fought to realize, became the share spirit of the age. Despite their limitations, the Enlightenment thinkers' profound contributions continue to be honored and inherited by later historical periods.

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