

The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents

Margaret C. Jacob

Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, xiii + 237 pp. 0-312-23701-4

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In *The Enlightenment*, Margaret C. Jacob has put together a concise yet varied collection of documents designed to provide the reader with an introduction to and overview of the Enlightenment period in Europe. Jacob is professor of history at the University of California at Los Angeles, and though the collection would clearly lend itself well to courses in modern European history, it could also prove to be a useful supplement to courses in modern European philosophy. The text not only includes writings by Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke, Kant, and Rousseau, it also locates them within a broader cultural context by emphasizing the social, political, and religious events that may have influenced and shaped these thinkers' philosophical ideas.

The book begins with an extensive introduction by Jacob, wherein she accomplishes several things. First, she discusses the origin and meaning of the term "enlightenment," in a way that helps to tie together the themes brought up in the readings that follow. Clarity, light, rationality, open-mindedness, and questioning of authority are among the concepts Jacob puts together as constitutive of enlightenment thought. She then goes on to give a clear and engaging discussion of the numerous social and cultural factors that contributed to these common enlightenment themes: political and religious events, scientific advances, social movements such as feminism, the increased interest in writing and reading about other cultures through travel literature, and changes in the philosophical views and emphases of the intellectuals of the

time. This introduction provides a helpful backdrop for the readings that follow, highlighting common themes that emerge in those texts and connecting them to a broader historical context.

From my perspective as a philosopher (and not a trained historian), the introduction appears clear and relatively comprehensive, given that it is meant as an introduction to other writings rather than an extensive history of the period. I was left, however, still wondering exactly why there was such an upsurge in intellectual clamoring for freedom of thought and action at this particular time in European history. Jacob does a good job of explaining how this emphasis played out in various social and cultural sectors, but I wanted more emphasis on its contributing causal factors. These are, perhaps, all woven together within the various political, religious, scientific events she describes; but I still wished for a clearer explanation of why the repressions of the time were met with resistance and an emphasis on individual freedom, as opposed to the acquiescence with which they may have been met previously. Another relatively minor comment I have about the introduction is that though Jacob laudably attempts to connect the discussion therein to the documents that follow, too often she does so in a somewhat repetitive fashion – she seems to say the same things about several of the documents more than once, in different sections of the introduction. The attentive reader is likely to pick up on these repetitions and may find them disconcerting, as if s/he has read the same passage before. Otherwise, I find the introduction very useful and engaging.

The documents that make up the bulk of the text come largely from the writings of philosophers and enlightenment *philosophes*: Locke, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Kant and Mendelssohn. There is also a collection of letters from Lady Mary Wortley Montague, and an originally-anonymous text criticizing Christianity, Judaism and Islam, entitled *Treatise of the Three Imposters*. The collection is an interesting mixture of ideas and themes, ranging from

politics to religion to education to moral relativism to feminism. Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" is included, as is a selection from Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, along with parts of Diderot's *Encyclopedia*. The selection from Locke focuses on education (from *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*), and there is included some travel writing from Lady Wortley Montague and Denis Diderot. Overall the reader gets a nice mixture of ideas on many topics, all of which circulate around the main enlightenment beliefs and values explained in the introduction. Each text is prefaced with a brief introduction and summary by Jacob.

I was largely pleased with the particular selections chosen and the way they were edited. I felt that enough of each text was left intact, for the most part, to avoid the kind of confusion that can occur for readers when crucial ideas or transitions are cut out for the sake of space constraints. The only text I felt an introductory reader might have trouble with is the selection from Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, as there are many particular events and persons to which Voltaire refers to that may be unfamiliar to those not already well-versed in this period of European history. This problem might have been remedied in Jacob's brief introduction to this selection, by explaining some of the names and events to which Voltaire refers without explanation.

An overall question I have about the Enlightenment as described by Jacob (and, indeed, as it is treated by most philosophers and historians whose texts I have read) has to do with the relationship between thinkers/writers/intellectuals and the social and political changes that occurred during this time. What kind of influence did those writing the texts included in this book have on their peers, on their political and religious leaders, on the public at large? Were they writing mainly to each other, or were their works widely read among the educated? What role did the not-so-educated play in the social and political changes that occurred during this

period, and how were enlightenment ideas disseminated among them (if at all)? Discussion of particular historical and philosophical periods most often focuses on intellectual writings, and it would be interesting to hear more about the relationship between those writings, the social and political events surrounding them, and the public at large. Jacob addresses these issues to some extent when she discusses the role of writers and intellectuals on the American and French Revolutions; but she also admits that enlightenment thought and activity required "literacy and some affluence" (1). It would be interesting to hear what those who were not literate and affluent were doing and thinking at the time, and whether and how their activities contributed to the ideas and events that we now call the Enlightenment.

When I have asked my students what kinds of things might help to improve my courses in the history of philosophy, one of the most common suggestions has been that we spend more time in class discussing how the ideas of the philosophers studied fit into the wider social, political and cultural context of their time. My students often want to know what kinds of non-philosophical influences helped shape the ideas of the philosophers we study, and what kind of influence these thinkers may have had on others within their own time. Though to some extent I believe philosophical ideas can stand and fall on their own merits, regardless of their origin or influence, I also believe that the degree to which they are accepted as standing or falling has much to do with other beliefs and values generally accepted at particular times and places. I agree with my students that putting philosophical ideas in context is a valuable exercise, and I have been trying to fill the gaps in my historical knowledge left open by a philosophical education that did not emphasize this context. *The Enlightenment* is a text I will consider using in a course in modern philosophy in the future, both as a historical supplement as a source of primary texts.

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