



The Enlightenment: A Very Short Introduction

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A foundational moment in the history of modern European thought, the Enlightenment continues to be a reference point for philosophers, scholars and opinion-formers. To many it remains the inspiration of our commitments to the betterment of the human condition. To others, it represents the elevation of one set of European values to the world, many of whose peoples have quite different values. But what is the relationship between the historical Enlightenment and the idea of 'Enlightenment', and can these two understandings be reconciled?

In this *Very Short Introduction*, John Robertson offers a concise historical introduction to the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement of eighteenth-century Europe. Discussing its intellectual achievements, he also explores how its supporters exploited new ways of communicating their ideas to a wider public, creating a new 'public sphere' for critical discussion of the moral, economic and political issues facing their societies.

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The Enlightenment: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Ian says

A brilliant exploration of the key themes, ideas, and preoccupations of the Enlightenment. Unlike some other historians, Robertson maintains that the Enlightenment did exist as a discernible intellectual movement with a distinct set of concerns and methodologies. At the same time, he attempts to distinguish between the historian's Enlightenment and the philosopher's Enlightenment, while acknowledging the truth in both characterizations.

One thing I especially appreciate, both about the book and this series in general, is that "very short introduction" does not mean "for dummies." In each chapter, Robertson dives right in to some pretty heady specifics on, say, Biblical scholarship, natural philosophy, and ethics. However, these specifics are rarely overwhelming, instead providing a refreshingly immediate window into the discourses the better known works / authors of the period were responding to.

I also enjoyed the casual de-centering of the French *philosophes*. Instead of reading about a French Enlightenment and its shadows, Robertson narrates a truly pan-European phenomenon, in which Neapolitan, Dutch, German, Scottish and (less so) English texts interact with one another.

I found the chapter on public opinion particularly strong.

Darius says

1.5 stars. This is a very informative book, I want to make that clear. Did I enjoy it though? No; I honestly found it terribly boring, mainly because it's written in a dry, tedious manner.

Jason Comely says

One major takeaway from this book is that the study of history and other cultures, religions, economies can help identify and conceptualize problems in our own. History was a tool great thinkers like Voltaire, Gibbons and others used to inform their arguments and advance society.

Overall, this was a rewarding read, and greatly improved my understanding of the Enlightenment.

Gumbo Ya-ya says

This book might be more aptly titled *Using The Maximum Possible Number Of Words To Communicate The Minimum Possible Actual Content To The Reader: A Succinct Demonstration*. Seriously, it's at least 50% just names and dates, with minimal explanation of coherent trends and absolutely no attempt to provide any kind of over-arching, thematic summary. Robertson seems far too concerned with ensuring that he name-checks all

the requisite major figures to offer the lay-person an approachable entry to the subject of The Enlightenment. Conversely, I can only imagine that to a student of Enlightenment philosophy and/or history, the shallowness of the treatment would offer no novel insight. Who then, is this book for?

Olga says

Ce livre est une introduction très dense et informative, à cause de cela, parfois il est difficile de se trouver, mais en même temps, cette lecture enrichit énormément.

Vikas Datta says

Most illuminating... and dare I say, enlightening...

Jason Williams says

Delivers on its promise

Pretty much a bare bones introduction to the Enlightenment with all the key players and viewpoints well represented. To understand “modern thought” one must be exposed to these intellects but look elsewhere to really get the gist of their philosophies.

Stacy Bearnse says

This 18th-century movement represented a rebellion against long-established authority. It focused on the individual, freedom and personal development. Universities flourished. Church-imposed dogma of "one true doctrine" was challenged by toleration for differing beliefs. Free-thinking philosophers like Kant, Hobbs and Spinoza were unafraid of being labeled as heretics. Literacy rates soared, and advancements in printing allowed ideas to propagate beyond country borders, creating a new 'public sphere' for critical discussion of moral, economic and political issues. Another fine addition to the Oxford University Very Short Introduction series.

Paul Bowler says

Very interesting introduction to a very important subject. I didn't even have to look up many words.

And it provides signposts for further reading, which I hope to spend much of 2016 following.

Marc Riese says

A very short introduction with some important limitations

For this small book, John Robertson, Professor of the History of Political Thought at Cambridge University, takes on the large goals of outlining of the Enlightenment and explaining why it has been and continues to be contested. He also gives his opinions on contemporary academic disputes. This review does not attempt to summarize the contents of Robertson's book and focuses instead on the book's strengths and weaknesses and on Robertson's opinions. I recommend the book as an overview for non-beginners, but I disagree with some important points and the reader should be warned that this short work may not be sufficient for gaining much understanding of the Enlightenment nor why and how it has been contested. Those just beginning to learn about the Enlightenment may want to look for alternative books.

The author defines the Enlightenment as "an intellectual movement of 18th-century Europe ... characterized by certain distinctive ideas, but also by the commitment of its adherents to engaging with a wider public of readers and practitioners." The Enlightenment was associated with "philosophy", in the wider contemporary sense of the word, including science, and "it held out the prospect of a new, explicitly modern understanding of human beings' place in the world, and of radical improvement in the human condition." For some contemporaries, such as Jean d'Alembert, the Enlightenment was a phenomenon or "philosophical spirit" of enlightening with "the knowledge of the true" based on sense experience, for others, such as Immanuel Kant, it was the enlightening of human understanding and moral judgement based on reason.

What I liked most about this book is Robertson's noble attempt to meet his almost impossible goals for such a short and small book. His writing shows that he is qualified to give an outline, his text is informative and well structured, and he generally aims at being objective as a professional historian should. (He is less objective when summarizing Jonathan Israel's work and describing it as "hubris", page 126.) I also liked the book's inclusion of less celebrated Enlightenment contributors and his comparison of how philosophers and historians have evaluated the Enlightenment in the last century.

There is certainly a need for readers to get an overview of the Enlightenment and the subsequent intellectual battles waged over it. Achieving a good understanding of the Enlightenment is not easy. The many aspects, trends and events can be overwhelming and somehow a reader must gain a view of the whole. Robertson is brave to take up the titanic challenge of summarizing what is certainly one of the most profound and broad historical phenomena of human history and of explaining how it was contested. As he points out, the Enlightenment thinkers were the first to recognise the great difficulty of writing good histories – those that take in social, economic, intellectual and other historical dimensions in addition to more traditional histories of nations and their leaders. Perhaps no one has managed to do so since, let alone in a "very short introduction" format. The author correctly states that the Enlightenment "did not embrace every new idea or advance every good cause of its time" (page 13), but he should also have stated that his outline simply does not cover some of the dimensions of the Enlightenment that he mentions in the preceding pages. The main drawback of the author's outline, however, is the insufficiency of its explanations or indeed lack of explanations of the Enlightenment ideas and figures that it mentions. The book should have explained more about fewer ideas and people. Here is just one example from many: although the author emphasizes the importance of the distinction between the French "Enlightenment as a phenomenon" and the German "enlightenment process" on pages 2 and 8, nowhere does the book explain this process. Beginners may be bewildered by partially explained names and concepts.

One drawback spanning a large part of the book is Robertson's insistence on defining the historic

phenomenon of the Enlightenment according to calendar years – the 18th-century, as opposed to events, trends and continuities – and then going on to give example after example showing why this definition makes little sense. It is surprising in the first place that a professor of history would insist on using the 18th-century to set his goalposts; the history of thought is not tied to the Gregorian Calendar. And yet from page 3 onwards we read about events, trends and continuities starting in the 17th century that are obviously part of the intellectual movement called the Enlightenment. Enlightenment ideas of Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke were published and matured in the 17th century. Locke's conceptions of the self and of tabula rasa were certainly distinctive ideas of the Enlightenment. The contributions of Bacon and Newton to the Enlightenment focus on scientific method and empiricism were made in the 17th century. The "public" was sensitised to Enlightenment ideas in the 17th century. Coffee houses began to spread in the 17th century. Robertson's artificial definition (i.e., the 18th century limitation) leads to twisted history like the following: "The problem of determining an Enlightenment attitude towards religion is compounded by the extent to which its characteristic concerns were current well before the 18th. Critical enquiry into the history of religion, along with the arguments for toleration and for the subordination of church and state, were all to be found in the 17th century." If you define the Enlightenment as "an intellectual movement characterised by certain distinctive ideas", and these ideas were already maturing in the second half of the 17th-century, then it makes no sense to define the beginning of the historic phenomenon as the beginning of the 18th-century. On page 118, he points out that the historic phenomenon was clearly ended by the French Revolution – that is, by a historical event.

My main criticism is of the author's conclusion concerning the contemporary discussion of the relevance of the Enlightenment and his opinion that historians should not seek the relevance of history to modern society nor, by implication, bother to communicate what matters with respect to modern society.

Robertson states that an intellectual-historical approach to the Enlightenment – the approach taken in this book – can offer historical perspective (page 128). The terminology (e.g., "philosophy") and discourses of the 18th century were different from today. Key Enlightenment figures, including Locke, Rousseau and Adam Smith, recognised that Europeans were just as cruel as those societies they despised, that "progress" and "modernity" always came with of vanity, inequality and other moral compromises. Some central Enlightenment notions such as "political economy" were followed by 20th century ideologically driven disasters and are simply insufficient for 21st century challenges. The Enlightenment was no panacea and clearly did not open the doors of perfection to humanity. Page 129: "At this distance, therefore, we should not be trying to reassure ourselves that the Enlightenment still matters. But we can enrich our own thinking, our awareness of the variety of ways of understanding human affairs, by imaginatively reconstructing the conceptual languages of Enlightenment thinkers, recognizing the problems they encountered, and appreciating the originality of their responses to them. It is not the relevance of the past which the intellectual historian seeks, but the challenge of understanding how problems were formulated, addressed, and conceptualized in terms different from those we use now."

In summary, the author is saying that the Enlightenment was another world with a language foreign to our times, and that studying it can enrich our thinking and awareness, but intellectual historians should not be interested in its relevance today nor, by implication, bother to communicate that relevance to society. I disagree with this extremely limited view. University professors have an ethical duty to contribute to their field, to teach their students and to communicate with society. And society - the greater public - understands best and cares most about things that matter and are relevant. As the great historian John Morris Roberts wrote, everyday people "strive to make sense of events by getting them 'in perspective' and in fact make judgements about world history all the time." If historians do not help, the public will struggle to understand and will have dangerous misconceptions about the relevance of good things, such as the American Consitution, and about terrible things, such as the Holocaust.

Some central ideas of the Enlightenment – of liberty of religion, thought and expression; of tolerance, pluralism and secularism; of separation of state and church; of democracies; of human rights and betterment; of reasoning and constantly seeking knowledge of nature – are not utterly foreign words only particular to the Enlightenment context. The same can be said for distinctive Enlightenment ideas that were naive and dangerous, such as confidence in rationalism and continuous progress. Enlightenment ideas are relevant and matter because they teach us how to protect humanity from tyranny, folly, hatred and ignorance.

Richard Carter says

I've always struggled to get my head around what precisely was meant by *the Enlightenment*. To me, it means a period in the eighteenth century, in which intellectuals tried to be a bit more, well, *enlightened*. It speaks to me of science, and networking, and the idea of progress—including a gradual abandonment of religion, and the adoption of more secular thought. But it was never clear to me whether how I thought of *the Enlightenment* was consistent with how everyone else thinks of it. So, when I saw Oxford University Press's short introduction to this very subject, I thought it was time to find out once and for all what the Enlightenment was all about.

It turns out my general confusion was far more reasonable than I'd imagined. As Michael J Benson explains in this rather high-brow, and often difficult-to-understand 'introduction', the concept of *the Enlightenment* meant different things to different people at the time, and has evolved to mean different things to different people today. Benson goes to great lengths to explain the different takes on the concept, making a particular distinction between what it meant (and means) to philosophers, and what it means to historians. As a person who is neither, however, I found his early description of the Enlightenment as "a distinct intellectual movement of the 18th century, dedicated to the better understanding, and thence practical advancement, of the human condition on this earth" a useful one-line summary.

Benson clearly knows his subject inside-out, and his writing is necessarily succinct. At times, however, it becomes so succinct as to be incomprehensible to the lay-person. Well, to this lay-person, at least. Here's an example (from p.54):

In the Catholic intellectual world, meanwhile, the problem of sociability came to the fore by another route. The catalyst was the *Lettres Provinciales* (1657) by Blaise Pascal (1623–62). Inspired by rigorous Augustinian theology, the *Provinciales* were a scathingly ironic attack on the moral casuistry and missionary compromises of the Jesuits. Insisting on the passion-driven concupiscence of the fallen man, Pascal effectively denied the capacity of natural law, or of its ancient philosophical progenitor, Stoicism, to render and keep men sociable. But if the Fall had made natural sociability impossible, how then did men manage to live in societies? [...]

(No, me neither.)

Such personal cluelessness aside, I did, however, particularly enjoy Benson's chapter on 'Enlightening the public'. This was more in line with what I was looking for from this book: a description of how Enlightenment ideas were communicated to the public by way of coffee houses, the printed word, literary salons, and so on.

A useful but difficult book.

Katie says

DNF at 50%.

Literally no point in finishing this. It's going in one ear and straight out the other. You'd think as a mainstream introduction that this would be easy to read and follow. It's not. It's boring as hell.

Pete says

The Enlightenment : A Very Short Introduction (2015) by John Robertson is an introduction to various Enlightenment thinkers and the influence they have had and how their contribution has been seen since The Enlightenment.

Robertson is a professor of the history of Political Thought at Oxford so he's well placed to write a book as ambitious as this that is so short. Kant, Hume, Smith, Rousseau and the other major enlightenment figures all have their impact and work described.

The book also discusses how The Enlightenment has been seen since by various philosophers and historians.

The book shows the diversity of thought of the major Enlightenment figures and inadvertently that Steven Pinker's thesis that it is some central idea from the Enlightenment that has driven current prosperity is dubious. This is not to say modernity isn't prosperous, just that Pinker's description of The Enlightenment as being a secular, atheist movement toward reason is not something that many of the major Enlightenment figures would have agreed with.

The book made me want to read more of the works of major Enlightenment figures and get more of an understanding of them. It was worth reading for me to get some overview of what is meant when people talk about The Enlightenment.
