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Reaction Paper

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Honors World History

The Enlightenment occurred in the 1700s, starting in Europe. The enlightenment stressed the importance of reason in analyzing and investigating. “This time period brought together a range of thinkers and writers- natural scientists, philosophers, satirists, economists, historians, essayists, novelists, political theorists, and even musicians.” (Harman, 242) The change in the way people felt and were treated all changed during this time.

The gathering of many very intelligent thinkers, scientists, etc. has all made a colossal impact on spreading the Enlightenment. “What they shared was a belief in the power of rational understanding based on empirical knowledge.” (Harman, 242) One philosopher that impacted the following century was Isaac Newton. He was from the 18th century, and he defined gravity, infinitesimal calculus and the principals of modern physics. Isaac Newton was said to be influenced by Descartes, a philosopher from France. However, the biggest influence had to come from England. John Locke insisted that all any idea comes from what we already know. He believed that people were reasonable, and has natural rights from birth. These natural rights include life, liberty and property. Locke had many admirers which included, Voltaire and Montesquieu of France. These great thinkers were drawling the conclusion that the continental countries of Europe should be reformed similar to the English.

The ideas that many philosophers shared were said to be spread by salons and books. Among the many books was a 28-volume encyclopedia written by Diderot. This encyclopedia was written to change the way people would think. Slavery and freedom of expression were among the many topics listed in the encyclopedia. Churches opposed this book and threatened to kill those who would read it. On the other hand, Salons were group gatherings which many well-known people would come together to discuss different issues. The more well-known guests that would show up, the more recognized the host would be. These two spreading ideas would eventually get their word out, even as far as to the lower class.

Major enlightenment thinkers also included Thomas Hobbes, Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft. Thomas Hobbes argued that people were cruel, greedy and selfish. He came up with the Social Contract; an agreement between people and society. Lastly, Hobbes believed that the government should be an absolute monarchy, which would give the king and queen all the power. However, Rousseau argued that for the most part, people were good. He couldn’t stand unequal wealth distributions and believed that the government is a contract between people and rulers. Lastly, Rousseau believed that governments should be elected freely and that the good of the community is more important than the good of one person. Mary Wollstonecraft was a fighter for females to have natural rights. Although she believed that a woman’s first duty is motherhood, she argued for equal education for boys and girls. She also believed that women should make their own decisions. These enlightenment thinkers applied reason and their knowledge to improve human society. These ideas impacted as far as to today’s world. Today, education is equal and women have the right to make their own choices.

One of the ongoing subjects related to the enlightenment was slavery. It was one of the biggest topics, with many mixed emotions. “Have courage to use your own reason.” (Kant) This is exactly the way that many people went on discussing this topic. Voltaire was against slave trade, he believed in having religious tolerance. Diderot was another philosopher that went against slavery, believing that everyone should have the right to say what they want, when they want. On the other hand, popes, emperors, princes and lords all needed an easy was to make money. This meant that churches helped spread the market forces and made it easier for others to make money off of slavery. Slavery was basically the exchanging of people for money. The person traded would do whatever his owner asked of him. Thankfully, the enlightenment was one impact that led to abolishing slavery. This was one of the many positive things that came out of the Enlightenment period.