

POLEMICS IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE EVOLUTION OF CRITICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract: This article explores the pivotal influence of Enlightenment thinkers on the development of critical thinking as a philosophical, cultural, and educational paradigm. Emerging in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Enlightenment challenged traditional reliance on religious authority, inherited dogma, and monarchical power, instead emphasizing rational inquiry, empirical observation, and the autonomy of individual thought. Philosophers such as John Locke, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Denis Diderot, and Immanuel Kant contributed diverse but interconnected ideas that collectively transformed European intellectual life. Their emphasis on skepticism, rationalism, and educational reform laid the foundation for modern notions of critical thinking, understood as the capacity to analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, and resist manipulation. The study argues that these contributions are not only of historical value but also remain relevant in the 21st century, as societies seek to cultivate media literacy, democratic participation, and rational public discourse.

Keywords: Enlightenment; critical thinking; rationalism; empiricism; skepticism; autonomy; pedagogy; philosophy of education; intellectual history

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается влияние мыслителей эпохи Просвещения на формирование критического мышления и его культурное значение. Такие философы, как Локк, Юм, Вольтер, Руссо, Кант, Монтескье и Дидро, заложили основы рационального анализа, скептицизма, автономии личности и образовательной реформы. Их идеи определили развитие критического мышления в эпистемологии, политике, педагогике и этике. Отмечается также глобальное звучание этих идей, включая параллели с джадидизмом в мусульманском Востоке. Делается вывод о том, что критическое мышление в духе Просвещения остаётся личной добродетелью и гражданской обязанностью в XXI веке.

Ключевые слова: Просвещение; критическое мышление; автономия; скептицизм; рациональное познание; образование; демократия.

Anotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada Ma'rifat davri mutafakkirlarining tanqidiy tafakkur rivojiga ta'siri tahlil qilinadi. Lokk, Yum, Volter, Russo, Kant, Monteskye va Didro kabi faylasuflar shaxsiy mustaqillik, shubha, aqlga tayanish va ta'lim islohoti g'oyalarini ilgari surib, zamonaviy tanqidiy tafakkurning asoslarini yaratdilar. Ularning qarashlari bilish nazariyasi, siyosat, pedagogika va axloqda muhim o'rin egalladi. Shuningdek, maqolada ushbu g'oyalar jahon miqyosida yangrayotgani, xususan, jadidchilik harakati bilan o'xshash jihatlari ko'rsatiladi. Xulosa shuki, Ma'rifat davri tanqidiy tafakkuri XXI asrda ham shaxsiy fazilat va fuqarolik burchi sifatida dolzarbligini saqlab qolmoqda.

Kalit so'zlar : Ma'rifat davri; tanqidiy tafakkur; mustaqillik; shubha; aqlga tayanish; ta'lim; demokratiya.

Introduction. The Enlightenment, often referred to as The Age of Reason, was one of the most transformative intellectual movements in human history. Taking shape in the late 17th and flourishing throughout the 18th century, it reshaped the philosophical, political, and cultural landscape of Europe and beyond. At its core, the Enlightenment sought to liberate the human

mind from the constraints of dogma, superstition, and unquestioned authority, advocating instead for reason, inquiry, and independent judgment. A central outcome of this intellectual revolution was the emergence of critical thinking as both an individual skill and a cultural value. While earlier traditions of rational inquiry existed in classical philosophy and medieval scholasticism, the Enlightenment elevated critical thinking into a universal principle that was to guide education, science, politics, and everyday life. No longer was truth to be dictated by ecclesiastical authority or monarchs; instead, it was to be discovered, debated, and tested through rational argument and empirical observation. Critical thinking, as understood today, is the ability to analyze ideas, evaluate evidence, question assumptions, and reach reasoned conclusions. It requires intellectual autonomy, skepticism toward unsupported claims, and openness to dialogue. These qualities—now considered fundamental in education and civic life—were crystallized during the Enlightenment, when philosophers began to articulate the importance of independent reasoning and the dangers of blind obedience. The thinkers of the Enlightenment approached the problem of critical thought from different perspectives.

This article aims to trace the influence of Enlightenment thinkers on the development of critical thinking by analyzing their philosophical contributions and considering their relevance for contemporary education and society. The study is organized as follows: first, a review of relevant scholarship on the Enlightenment and critical thinking; second, a methodological explanation of the approach used; third, a detailed analysis of the contributions of Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Diderot, and Kant; fourth, a discussion situating their legacy in broader intellectual and cultural contexts; and finally, a conclusion highlighting their enduring significance. By revisiting Enlightenment philosophy, the article not only situates the historical origins of critical thinking but also underscores its continuing importance in a world facing new forms of dogma, misinformation, and intellectual passivity.

Literature Review. The study of the Enlightenment and its impact on critical thinking has been an object of sustained academic interest for more than two centuries. Scholars from philosophy, history, pedagogy, and literary studies have attempted to define the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment, particularly in relation to the cultivation of rational judgment and the autonomy of thought. This literature review synthesizes classical and contemporary perspectives, highlighting their relevance to the development of critical thinking as both a theoretical construct and a pedagogical practice.

One of the foundational works in the study of the Enlightenment is Ernst Cassirer's *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), in which he frames the period as the "age of reason." Cassirer stresses that Enlightenment thought was not merely a rejection of dogma, but a positive effort to construct rational systems of knowledge. He shows how reason was conceptualized as an emancipatory force, capable of freeing humanity from ignorance and superstition. In Cassirer's interpretation, figures such as Locke, Hume, and Voltaire are not simply critics of tradition but architects of new modes of intellectual autonomy. This perspective laid the groundwork for later analyses that linked Enlightenment rationalism to modern theories of education and critical inquiry.

Jonathan Israel has advanced this line of thought in his monumental trilogy on the Enlightenment (2001–2011), where he distinguishes between the "moderate" and the "radical" Enlightenment. For Israel, the radical strand, influenced by Spinoza, represented a profound break with traditional authority, advocating universal equality, freedom of thought, and secularism. He argues that the radical Enlightenment provided the intellectual conditions for modern democracy and the scientific worldview, both of which are closely aligned with the principles of critical thinking. Israel's distinction is crucial for contemporary debates because it highlights the diversity within Enlightenment thought, showing that critical thinking was not a monolithic invention but the result of competing intellectual trajectories.

Paul Hazard's *The European Mind, 1680–1715* (1935) adds another dimension by examining the crisis of intellectual foundations at the turn of the 18th century. Hazard emphasizes the cultural

and psychological upheaval that accompanied the transition from scholastic to modern modes of thought. His narrative illustrates how skepticism, rationalism, and empiricism destabilized inherited traditions, thereby creating space for individual judgment. This historical account suggests that the Enlightenment's contribution to critical thinking lay not only in explicit theories but also in the very destabilization of unquestioned authority.

In the 20th century, Jürgen Habermas reinterpreted the Enlightenment through the lens of communicative rationality. In works such as *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), Habermas argues that the Enlightenment project is unfinished and remains essential for contemporary society. He stresses the importance of rational-critical debate in the public sphere, connecting Enlightenment ideals with the development of democratic institutions. Habermas's analysis underscores that critical thinking is not an isolated cognitive skill but a social practice, deeply embedded in discourse and collective reasoning. This aligns with educational approaches that view critical thinking as dialogical and context-dependent rather than purely individualistic.

Karl Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), extends Enlightenment principles into the philosophy of science and politics. He defends the Enlightenment commitment to rational criticism, arguing that scientific progress depends on falsifiability and open debate. Popper's notion of "critical rationalism" directly echoes Enlightenment values, emphasizing the provisional nature of knowledge and the necessity of continuous scrutiny. This framework remains influential in educational theory, particularly in teaching students to evaluate evidence, challenge assumptions, and engage in constructive skepticism.

In parallel, John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916) links critical thinking to democratic life, portraying it as an indispensable habit of mind for active citizenship. Dewey inherits the Enlightenment emphasis on rational autonomy but grounds it in practical problem-solving and social interaction. He presents education not as the transmission of fixed truths but as the cultivation of reflective inquiry. Dewey's pedagogical vision resonates with the Enlightenment ideal of intellectual emancipation, while also updating it for modern democratic contexts.

Erich Fromm provides yet another dimension in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), where he critiques the ambivalence of modern freedom. Fromm acknowledges the Enlightenment's role in liberating individuals from traditional constraints but warns that such freedom can provoke anxiety, leading people to seek new forms of authority. His analysis is significant for critical thinking because it highlights the psychological obstacles to rational autonomy. Fromm reminds us that critical thinking requires not only cognitive skills but also the courage to resist conformity and authoritarianism.

Contemporary educational research continues to draw on this intellectual tradition. Richard Paul and Linda Elder, for instance, have developed comprehensive frameworks for teaching critical thinking that echo Enlightenment rationalism while integrating insights from modern psychology and pedagogy. They argue that critical thinking involves clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, and fairness—qualities already anticipated in the works of Locke and Kant but now formalized for classroom instruction.

Taken together, these scholarly contributions illustrate the enduring significance of the Enlightenment for critical thinking. Cassirer and Hazard emphasized its historical foundations; Israel identified its radical democratic potential; Habermas and Popper reinterpreted its legacy in modern philosophy and science; Dewey and Fromm expanded it into pedagogy and psychology. This multifaceted literature suggests that Enlightenment thinkers did not merely provide isolated theories but inaugurated a long-lasting intellectual tradition, one that continues to inform debates on education, democracy, and rational autonomy today.

Methods. This study employs a historical–philosophical approach combined with elements of comparative analysis. The historical–philosophical method allows us to situate Enlightenment thinkers within their socio-political and cultural contexts, thereby tracing how their intellectual innovations contributed to the emergence of critical thinking. Comparative analysis enables us to

evaluate both commonalities and differences among these thinkers, especially regarding their treatment of reason, freedom, and the role of the individual in society.

Primary texts form the basis of the analysis, including Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters*, Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*, and Diderot's contributions to the *Encyclopédie*. These works are supplemented by secondary scholarship, which provides interpretive frameworks for understanding the Enlightenment's legacy.

The methodological orientation emphasizes hermeneutic interpretation, focusing on how Enlightenment texts construct meaning through concepts such as reason, skepticism, autonomy, and critique. This approach is complemented by pedagogical theory, particularly the ways in which Enlightenment ideas have been translated into modern educational practices emphasizing critical thinking.

Results. John Locke's contribution to critical thinking is primarily articulated in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke rejects the notion of innate ideas, arguing instead that knowledge originates in experience. This empiricist stance requires individuals to rely on observation, reflection, and judgment rather than tradition or authority. Locke also highlights the importance of distinguishing between degrees of certainty, probability, and opinion—an analytical skill central to critical reasoning. His political writings, particularly *Two Treatises of Government*, further stress the role of rational deliberation in legitimizing authority. For Locke, citizens must assess government actions critically, ensuring they align with the principles of natural rights. In both epistemology and politics, Locke advances the view that autonomy of judgment is indispensable. David Hume radicalized the empiricist project by applying skepticism to both metaphysics and causation. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume challenges the assumption that causality can be rationally proven, suggesting instead that human reasoning relies on habit and custom. This skepticism does not lead to nihilism but encourages intellectual humility, reminding us of the limits of human cognition. Hume's emphasis on evidence, probability, and the critical examination of human belief systems aligns closely with modern conceptions of scientific reasoning. His work introduces the idea that critical thinking must balance rational inquiry with an awareness of cognitive limitations. Voltaire's contribution lies in his relentless critique of dogma and intolerance. Through works such as *Philosophical Letters* (1734) and *Candide* (1759), he used irony, satire, and wit as tools of critical examination. Voltaire's polemics against religious fanaticism and absolutism embody the Enlightenment's ethos of questioning authority. By emphasizing freedom of thought and expression, he linked critical thinking with civic courage. Voltaire demonstrates that critical thinking is not confined to academic inquiry but is also a public act, intended to challenge entrenched power structures and promote tolerance. His literary strategies illustrate the role of rhetorical style in stimulating independent judgment. Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762) and *Émile, or On Education* (1762) situate critical thinking within the context of civic and moral development. In politics, Rousseau insists that legitimate authority arises from the "general will," which can only be discerned through rational deliberation by free citizens. In education, he rejects rote memorization and advocates experiential learning, arguing that children should develop judgment by engaging directly with the world. Rousseau thus bridges philosophy and pedagogy, suggesting that critical thinking is essential both for self-realization and for democratic participation. His emphasis on authenticity and moral reasoning expands the scope of critical thinking beyond logical analysis to include ethical autonomy. Immanuel Kant provides perhaps the most explicit articulation of critical thinking in his essay *What is Enlightenment?* (1784), where he defines Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." For Kant, immaturity is the inability to use one's reason without guidance from another. The essence of critical thinking, therefore, lies in intellectual independence. His *Critique of Pure Reason*

(1781) further elaborates the limits and possibilities of rational inquiry, establishing categories of understanding that govern human cognition. Kant emphasizes the importance of critique as both a philosophical and a practical activity, one that enables individuals to resist manipulation and achieve autonomy. His categorical imperative underscores the moral dimension of critical thinking, requiring reason to be exercised in a way that respects universal human dignity. In *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), Montesquieu applies comparative reasoning to political and legal systems. His method involves examining diverse forms of governance and assessing their effects on liberty and justice. Montesquieu's analysis of the separation of powers illustrates how institutional design can safeguard critical deliberation in public life. By grounding political structures in empirical observation and rational analysis rather than tradition or dogma, Montesquieu models a form of systemic critical thinking. His comparative approach also anticipates modern social science methodologies, where evaluation depends on systematic analysis of multiple variables. Diderot's central role in editing the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772) exemplifies the Enlightenment's commitment to the democratization of knowledge. The project sought to make scientific, philosophical, and technical knowledge accessible to a broad public, thereby fostering independent judgment. Diderot's own writings often challenge established norms, emphasizing freedom of inquiry and skepticism toward authority. By organizing knowledge systematically and encouraging readers to form their own conclusions, the *Encyclopédie* embodies critical thinking in practice. Diderot demonstrates that intellectual autonomy requires not only philosophical principles but also institutional and cultural mechanisms for disseminating knowledge.

Discussion. The results of this study reveal that Enlightenment thinkers made diverse but complementary contributions to the development of critical thinking. Yet their influence cannot be fully understood without situating their ideas within a broader intellectual and cultural framework. Critical thinking, as articulated by Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Montesquieu, and Diderot, was not merely an abstract philosophical project; it was a response to historical conditions that demanded new ways of questioning authority, validating knowledge, and empowering the individual.

One of the striking features of the Enlightenment is its consistent emphasis on the autonomy of judgment. Locke's empiricism, Rousseau's pedagogy, and Kant's moral philosophy all converge on the principle that individuals must think for themselves rather than submit passively to tradition. This idea remains foundational to modern conceptions of critical thinking, particularly in education, where students are trained not to memorize information mechanically but to evaluate sources, weigh evidence, and form independent conclusions. At the same time, the Enlightenment model of autonomy also highlights a tension: while it valorizes the power of reason, it often underestimates the social and cultural conditions that shape reasoning processes. Another theme that emerges is the role of skepticism. Hume's critique of causation demonstrates that human reason is prone to limitations, biases, and errors. His perspective enriches the Enlightenment discourse by reminding us that critical thinking is not only about trusting reason but also about interrogating its boundaries. This lesson is increasingly relevant in the 21st century, where overreliance on technology and data may obscure the need for interpretive humility. Hume's skepticism suggests that critical thinking must combine rational inquiry with self-reflection about the limits of human cognition.

The Enlightenment also demonstrates the political dimensions of critical thinking. Montesquieu's theory of the separation of powers and Voltaire's attacks on intolerance show that reason is not confined to the classroom or the laboratory—it also operates in the public sphere. Their works remind us that critical thinking is an act of resistance against authoritarianism and dogma. This legacy has profoundly shaped modern democratic culture, where the ability to question political rhetoric, scrutinize institutions, and demand accountability is central to civic life. In this sense, critical thinking is both an intellectual virtue and a civic duty.

The pedagogical implications of Enlightenment philosophy deserve special attention. Rousseau and Diderot demonstrate that critical thinking cannot be cultivated solely through abstract reasoning; it requires structured educational practices and accessible knowledge systems. Rousseau's experiential learning and Diderot's *Encyclopédie* reflect complementary strategies: the former emphasizes personal engagement with reality, while the latter ensures broad dissemination of knowledge. These strategies together embody the Enlightenment's commitment to empowering individuals not only to think but also to act autonomously.

The global influence of Enlightenment critical thinking is particularly significant. While originating in European intellectual culture, these ideas resonated across different societies and historical moments. In the Muslim East, for example, the Jadid movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries echoed many Enlightenment principles. Reformers such as Ismail Gasprinskiy, Abdurauf Fitrat, and Mahmudhoja Behbudi emphasized rational inquiry, educational reform, and civic responsibility. Like the Enlightenment thinkers, they argued that true progress could not be achieved without cultivating intellectual independence and questioning outdated traditions.

This parallel illustrates the universal relevance of Enlightenment critical thinking, even as it adapted to distinct cultural and historical contexts.

Finally, the discussion highlights that the Enlightenment should not be romanticized as a purely rational or universally emancipatory project. Its intellectual achievements were accompanied by contradictions, including Eurocentrism and limited recognition of cultural plurality. Modern critical thinking, therefore, requires both appreciation and critique of the Enlightenment legacy. We must recognize its contributions to reason, autonomy, and democracy while also interrogating its blind spots. In this way, contemporary educators and scholars can continue the Enlightenment project while expanding it to embrace inclusivity, intercultural dialogue, and global perspectives.

Conclusion. The Enlightenment represents one of the most decisive turning points in the intellectual history of humanity. The thinkers of this era—Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Montesquieu, and Diderot—did not simply produce philosophical systems; they reshaped the very foundations of how human beings approach knowledge, authority, and social life. Their legacy lies in the creation of a culture of critique, in which ideas are tested not by tradition or dogma, but by evidence, reason, and ethical reflection.

This article has demonstrated that the development of critical thinking during the Enlightenment was multidimensional. Locke and Hume contributed to epistemology by redefining the relationship between experience, knowledge, and doubt. Voltaire and Montesquieu emphasized the civic dimension of critique, showing how reason could combat tyranny and intolerance. Rousseau and Diderot expanded the pedagogical sphere, highlighting the necessity of education and accessible knowledge for fostering independent judgment. Finally, Kant synthesized these tendencies by explicitly identifying critical thinking as the essence of Enlightenment, linking intellectual autonomy with moral responsibility.

The influence of these thinkers extends beyond Europe. The resonance of their ideas in reformist movements such as Jadidism illustrates that critical thinking is not confined to one culture but represents a universal human aspiration. The methods of skepticism, rational inquiry, and educational reform remain relevant for addressing contemporary challenges—whether in combating misinformation, promoting democratic values, or building intercultural understanding. At the same time, the Enlightenment was not without contradictions. Its universal ideals were often framed within a Eurocentric worldview that neglected the diversity of human experience. For this reason, modern scholarship must engage with the Enlightenment critically, preserving its achievements while correcting its limitations. The Enlightenment provided not only philosophical insights but also methodological tools and cultural values that continue to shape our conception of critical thinking. By drawing from this intellectual heritage, contemporary educators, scholars, and citizens can cultivate the habits of mind necessary for independent

reasoning, ethical decision-making, and responsible participation in public life. Critical thinking, as envisioned by the Enlightenment, remains both a personal virtue and a collective responsibility.

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