# What is Enlightenment?

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) famously answered this question with the Latin *Sapere aude!*—Dare to know! The European Enlightenment was an ambitious cultural project to spread reason, to change contemporaries' worldviews, and to transform political and social institutions. Enlightenment thinkers sought change within Europe, but also, at least implicitly, around the world. (In Chapters 15 and 16 we will look at sources from within the West and other cultures around the world that challenge this European Enlightenment worldview.)

The movement stressed universal laws and objective knowledge. There were, however, several different currents of Enlightenment thought. In addition to Kant's famous essay, the sources reproduced here include selections from Voltaire on tolerance, taking his fellow Europeans to task; Adam Smith on the "invisible hand" of the market and its propensity to support the common good; countered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's critique of private property and his views on the central importance of community and on the state's ability to force people to be free.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 14.1

### *"What is Enlightenment?" (1784), Immanuel Kant*

*Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority* is inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is *self-incurred* when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.

It is because of laziness and cowardice that so great a part of humankind, after nature has long since emancipated them from other people's direction (*naturaliter maiorennes*), nevertheless gladly remains minors for life, and that it becomes so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor! If I have a book that understands for me, a spiritual advisor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who decides upon a regimen for me, and so forth, I need not trouble myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay; others will readily undertake the irksome business for me. That by far the greatest part of humankind (including the entire fair sex) should hold the step toward majority to be not only troublesome but also highly dangerous will soon be seen to by those guardians who have kindly taken it upon themselves to supervise them; after they have made their domesticated animals dumb and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take a single step without the walking cart in which they have confined them, they then show them the danger that threatens them if they try to walk alone. Now this danger is not in fact so great, for by a few falls they would eventually learn to walk.

Source: Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?," from *Practical Philosophy (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant)*, edited by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

## PRIMARY SOURCE 14.2

### *"What is Tolerance?" (1764), Voltaire*

What is tolerance? It is the natural attribute of humanity. We are all formed of weakness and error: let us pardon reciprocally each other's folly. That is the first law of nature.

It is clear that the individual who persecutes a man, his brother, because he is not of the same opinion, is a monster. There is no difficulty here. . . .

Madmen, who have never been able to worship the God who made you! . . . Look at the Great Turk. He governs Guebres, Banians, Greek Christians, Nestorians, Romans. The first who tried to stir up tumult would be impaled; and everyone is at peace.

Of all the religions, the Christian is without doubt the one which should inspire tolerance most, although up to now the Christians have been the most intolerant of all men.

Source: Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) in Ben Ray Redman, ed., *The Portable Voltaire* (New York: Penguin, 1949), 212–13.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 14.3

### *On the Invisible Hand (1776), Adam Smith*

As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can, both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public

interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain; and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.

Source: Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), BK. 4, Ch. 2, p. 35.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 14.4

### *On Inequality (1755), Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying *This is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows, "Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody." But there is great probability that things had then already come to such a pitch, that they could no longer continue as they were; for the idea of property depends on many prior ideas, which could only be acquired successively, and cannot have been formed all at once in the human mind. Mankind must have made very considerable progress, and acquired considerable knowledge and industry, which they must also have transmitted and increased from age to age before they arrived at this last point of the state of nature.

Source: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau's Political Writings*, A Norton Critical Edition, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 34.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 14.5

### *On the Claims of Community (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

In fact, each individual, as a man, may have a particular will contrary or dissimilar to the general will which he has as a citizen. His particular interest may speak to him quite differently from the common interest: . . . he may wish to enjoy the rights of citizenship without being ready to fulfill the duties of a subject. The continuance of such an injustice could not but prove the undoing of the body politic.

In order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free; for this is the condition which, by giving each citizen to his country, secures him against all personal dependence. In this lies the key to the working of the political machine; this alone legitimizes civil undertakings, which, without it, would be absurd, tyrannical, and liable to the most frightful abuses.

Source: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau's Political Writings*, A Norton Critical Edition, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 34.

## QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Describe the language used in these documents. Is it neutral, couched in universal terms that apply everywhere?
2. Identify the common assumptions about human nature, society, and the natural world in these documents. What do they all share?
3. Explain what these authors mean by progress. What forces support progress, in their views, and what forces hinder or jeopardize it?
4. Assess the role of government—what it is or what it ought to be—indicated in these passages.