



Rousseau and Voltaire: The Lives of the Two Most Famous Intellectuals of the Enlightenment

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Analyzes both men's lives and most famous works *Includes footnotes and a bibliography for further reading *Includes a table of contents “To hold a pen is to be at war.” – Voltaire “Virtue is a state of war, and to live in it means one always has some battle to wage against oneself.” - Rousseau The grand narrative of the Enlightenment, usually recounted and understood in terms of progress and modernity, generally appears as a simplified evolution from the trappings of superstition, feudalism, and everything “irrational” to a world more similar to today’s world. Alongside the Renaissance, the Enlightenment is credited for the transition to an adherence to reason, secularism, and promotion of values such as individual and collective freedom and liberty. At the heart of the movement in France was François-Marie Arouet, better known by the pen name Voltaire, whose voluminous writings advocated for greater liberalism, including the freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. In addition to the classic *Candide*, Voltaire was a biting polemic whose satirical attacks on the Catholic Church were among the fiercest of his day. He also understood the risks he was taking with these writings, at one point explaining, “It is dangerous to be right in matters where established men are wrong.” The Enlightenment is looked upon fondly, and it serves to reinforce the notion that the present is superior to the past, but things did not change as rapidly or as completely as many believe. In fact, some recent historians have challenged the belief that the Enlightenment was responsible for the French Revolution, which is a vital issue when it comes to Voltaire. After all, Voltaire, as his contemporaries and as most of his modern readers know him, is widely regarded as the pinnacle of Enlightenment thought, the symbol of the era of reason, and the harbinger of modern values. In that regard, his work is often considered to be the backbone of the French Revolution, which began about a decade after his death. Voltaire was unquestionably monumental, but he was also an exceptional product of his age, and his writings can introduce readers to the broader picture of the Enlightenment as a sum of contrasting and varied forces, tendencies and events. One of the towering figures of the age was Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose works were essential to the ideological developments of the 18th century. The prestige of French literature in the 18th century resides especially in its revolutionary character; while the writers of the previous century used to support the social order through their works and showed sympathy and even attempted to explain the political order of the time, in the 18th century, art, literature, philosophy and science all contribute actively and fiercely to the fight against the absolutist monarch and his regime. While this was a current manifesting all throughout Europe, there were differences in practice, especially between close countries (as was the case of England and France). There are many books and articles published constantly on the life and works of Rousseau. What generated such an abundance of writings is the turbulent life he led and the courage and audacity he manifested while fighting the prejudices of the time and establishing his ideas firmly within the academic community. His life can best be described as a constant conflict, whether it was conflict with his wife, his employers, his colleagues and even his friends. Rousseau and Voltaire examines the lives and works of the Enlightenment's most famous thinkers. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about Rousseau like never before, in no time at all.

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