

The Philosophes

In the 1700s, France saw a flowering of Enlightenment thought. French **philosophes** (fee loh ZOHFS), or philosophers, felt that nothing was beyond the reach of human reason. As they examined ideas about government, law and society, they called for reforms to protect people's natural rights. Their ideas, like those of Locke, would shift political thought and strongly influence the development of democratic-republican government.

Montesquieu Calls for Separation of Powers

An early and influential *philosophe* was Baron de **Montesquieu** (MAHN tus kyoo). Montesquieu studied the governments of Europe, from Italy to England. He read about ancient and medieval Europe, and learned about Chinese and Native American cultures. He sharply criticized absolute monarchy.

In 1748, Montesquieu published *The Spirit of the Laws*, in which he discussed governments throughout history. Montesquieu felt that the best way to protect liberty was to divide the various functions and powers of government among three branches: the legislative, executive, and judicial.

He also felt that each branch of government should be able to serve as a check on the other two, an idea that we call checks and balances. Montesquieu's

beliefs would influence the Framers of the United States Constitution.

Voltaire Supports Freedom of Thought Probably the most famous of the *philosophes* was François-Marie Arouet, who took the name **Voltaire**. "My trade," said Voltaire, "is to say what I think." He used biting wit as a weapon to expose the abuses of his day. He targeted corrupt officials and idle aristocrats. With his pen, he battled inequality, injustice, and superstition. He detested the slave trade and deplored religious prejudice.

Voltaire's outspoken attacks offended both the French government and the Catholic Church. He was imprisoned and forced into exile. Even as he saw his books outlawed and sometimes even burned, he continued to defend the principle of freedom of speech.

Diderot Edits the *Encyclopedia* Denis Diderot (DEE duh roh) worked for years to produce a 28-volume set of books called the *Encyclopedia*. As the editor, Diderot did more than just compile articles. His purpose was "to change the general way of thinking" by explaining ideas on topics such as government, philosophy, and religion.

Diderot's *Encyclopedia* included articles by leading thinkers of the day, including Montesquieu and Voltaire. In these articles, the *philosophes* denounced slavery,

Montesquieu: Separation of Powers

| | FUNCTION | EXAMPLES IN U.S. GOVERNMENT | EXAMPLES IN BRITISH GOVERNMENT |
|-------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| LEGISLATIVE | Creates law | Congress | Parliament |
| EXECUTIVE | Enforces law | President | Prime minister |
| JUDICIAL | Applies law | Supreme Court | U.K. Supreme Court |

>> Analyze Charts Montesquieu believed in the separation of the powers of government into branches. Who currently heads the executive branch of government in the United States?

praised freedom of expression, and urged education for all. They attacked divine-right theory and traditional religions.

The French government viewed the *Encyclopedia* as an attack on public morals, and the pope threatened to excommunicate Roman Catholics who bought or read the volumes. Despite these and other efforts to ban the *Encyclopedia*, more than 4,000 copies were printed between 1751 and 1789.

Rousseau Promotes the Social Contract The most controversial *philosophe* was **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (roo SOH). Rousseau believed that people in their natural state were basically good. This natural innocence, he felt, was corrupted by the evils of society, especially the unequal distribution of property.

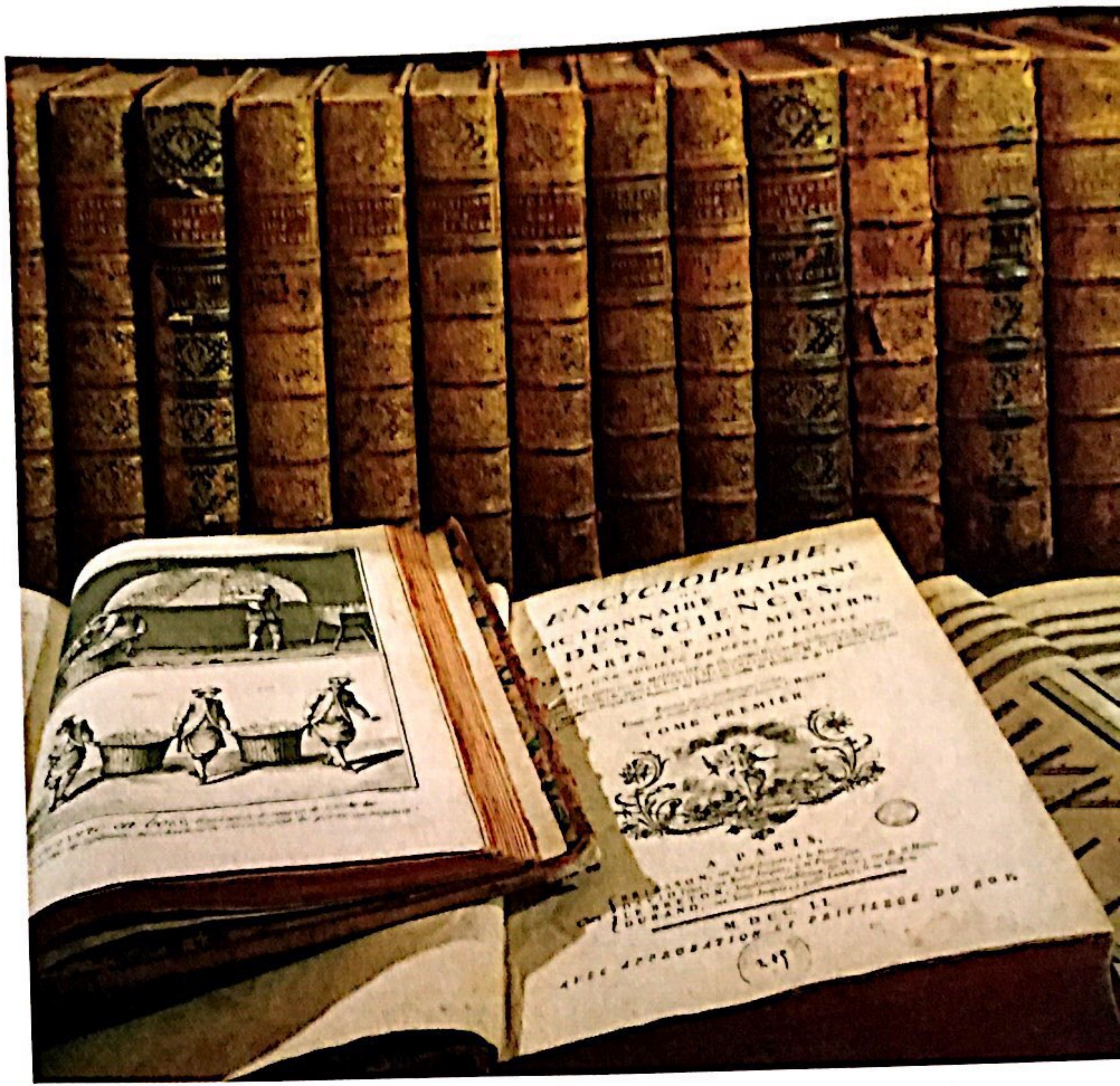
In 1762, Rousseau set forth his ideas about government and society in *The Social Contract*. Rousseau felt that society placed too many limitations on people's behavior. He believed that some controls were necessary, but that they should be minimal. Additionally, only governments that had been freely elected should impose these controls. Rousseau put his faith in the "general will," or the best conscience of the people. The good of the community as a whole, he said, should be placed above individual interests. Woven through Rousseau's work is a hatred of all forms of political and economic oppression.

Women and the Enlightenment The Enlightenment slogan "free and equal" did not apply to women. Though the *philosophes* said women had natural rights, their rights were limited to the areas of home and family.

By the late 1700s, a small but growing number of women protested this view. Germaine de Staël in France and Mary Wollstonecraft in Britain argued that women were being excluded from the social contract itself. Their arguments, however, were ridiculed and often sharply condemned.

Wollstonecraft was a British writer and thinker. She accepted that a woman's first duty was to be a good mother but felt that a woman should be able to decide what was in her own interest without depending on her husband. In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft called for equal education for girls and boys. Only education, she argued, could give women the tools they needed to participate equally with men in public life. Her ideas would influence the women's rights movement that emerged in the next century.

? IDENTIFY SUPPORTING DETAILS What political philosophies did Jean-Jacques Rousseau set forth in *The Social Contract*?



>> Diderot's *Encyclopedia* was a collection of articles written by famous Enlightenment thinkers. It represented the rational approach of Enlightenment thinkers.



>> Writer Mary Wollstonecraft was a passionate advocate for social and educational equality for women.