Great Ideas of the Age of Reason

The Age of Reason was a revolution in the thought of mankind. For the first time since the Greeks there was an outpouring of ideas about life, society and the nature of truth. Philosophers wrote about how truth could be discovered through knowledge and about the perfect society.

This activity is about five great philosophers of the Age of Reason. You are to read about, compare and reflect on the ideas of these great thinkers.

The ideas of Francis Bacon, John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau are summarized on the next five pages.

Write short essays on the following topics comparing the ideas of the great philosophers. Decide which ideas you agree with the most and give reasons for your opinions.

1. Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau and Bacon had ideas about what the perfect society should be. Which ideas do you agree with the most?

2. Locke, Spinosa, Rousseau and Bacon had opinions about the importance of knowledge. Which philosopher do you agree with the most?

3. Rousseau and Voltaire had opposing views about the sources of evil in society. Who do you think was most correct?

4. Bacon, Locke and Rousseau wrote about errors in judgement. Why do you think people make mistakes in thinking?

5. Voltaire, Spinosa, Rousseau and Bacon had opinions about the purpose of life. Do you agree with their ideas and what do you think is the purpose of life?
Great Ideas of the Age of Reason

The Purpose of Life

The greatest error in life is to seek too much. “Virtue is like a rich stone—best plain set.”

The Importance of Knowledge

The mind should be purged of counterfeit values. False images or mental “idols” that give a person a distorted picture of life should be eliminated.

Sources of Error

There are four kinds of false images that produce error in thought.

Idols of the Tribe

The human mind distorts its images of the world. People believe not what is true but what they want to be true. The mind jumps easily from faulty observations to faulty conclusions. People must learn to be patient and take pains to observe and reason carefully. Superstition, dreams and omens should be discarded. These are “idols” common to all human beings.

Idols of the Cave

These are fallacies that each individual has. Each person has a cave or den which distorts and discolors the light of reality. Some people are analytical and see only the trees, not the forest: others have minds which are synthetic, they see the forest but not the trees. Every person sees the world through the bias of his family, church, education, political party, nation, etc. A person should recognize the limitations of his point of view.

Idols of the Market Place

These mistakes arise out of the interaction of people during the course of living. The errors arise from a vagueness of language. Words are too imprecise to reveal what we really mean or the meanings of words are misunderstood. Vague and misleading words should be eliminated from the language.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

He was an official in the court of Queen Elizabeth I of England. He was very wealthy and powerful.

Idols of the Theater

Life is a play upon the stage of the world, and many humans would like to make the play simpler than it really is. In order to understand the real world, false definitions and unfounded prejudices or dogmas must be tossed out. People must reason from observations. If people begin with certainties, they will end in doubt; if they begin with doubt, they will end in certainty. Don’t make assumptions and generalizations until you check the facts.

The Perfect Society

In the New Atlantis Bacon describes a society in which people pursue the cooperative conquest of nature. They have superior happiness through intelligence. There is no selfish exploitation by businessmen. Leaders are selected for character and intelligence. There is no competition among people; only cooperation for the betterment of society. The only trade is in the ideas by scientists and philosophers who travel the world to exchange new ideas on fair play.

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The Purpose of Life
Man can only live happily in a natural state. Civilization corrupts man and makes him dishonest. Man must avoid education and follow his instincts rather than his reason.

The Source of Evil
As long as man lives in a natural state and has enough to eat he is friendly toward others. When humans become educated and develop hungers beyond food they become aggressive, spiteful and eager for a fight. The educated and rich want to enslave others to satisfy their hungers. The evils of civilization and education are due to people listening to their minds rather than their hearts.

The Nature of Man
Man is naturally good. His environment and civilization make him bad. All people are equal.

The Nature of God and Religion
God is good and he is everywhere in nature. If man follows his heart, he will discover that there is one religion for all and everyone will be saved. There will be kindness, tolerance and understanding among people. This will be achieved only if man lives in a natural way.

The Perfect Society
The perfect society is formed by people through a social contract. Through the social contract all people will have an equal voice. The will of the people must be represented, not through electing representatives, but through the people voting directly on issues. If the people have enough information, they will always make the right decision.

The government does not have the right to give anyone special favors. The state has the right to weave the interests of individuals into the common good.

Private property will be abolished because property leads people to take advantage of others. The people will own all property through the government and it will be managed in the interest of the common good of all people. The "ideal government" will reflect the "general will" of all the people.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
Rousseau was born to a poor family in Geneva, Switzerland. He did not begin to write philosophy until he was nearly forty.

Questions
1. What makes people “unkind?”
2. Why is private property "bad?"
3. How should decisions be made according to Rousseau?
The Purpose of Life
The goal of life is to obtain happiness. Happiness is the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain. Pleasure is not a state but a mood. Pleasure is what takes place as a person moves to a greater sense of fulfillment. Each person must love himself and seek whatever is useful to him. Man must have the power to perfect himself.

The Importance of Knowledge
Only knowledge will provide freedom and power. The only permanent happiness is the pursuit of knowledge and the joy of understanding. Spinoza created different types of knowledge. One must use only the best form of knowledge. Hearsay is one type of knowledge. It is second-hand knowledge. It is gained from someone else. Empirical knowledge is based upon what we generally know works, but is not based upon any scientific test. Immediate deduction is knowledge based upon reasoning. This knowledge is superior to the other two types, but is subject to correction by the direct experience of science. The best form of knowledge is a combination of deduction and science.

The Nature of God
God is everywhere and exists in everything. This is called pantheism.

What Life Is About
Everything in life is interconnected. The unity of the world, both good and bad things, is part of God’s plan. Even though God's intelligence exists in everything, there are many different grades of intelligence. A tree is below the mind of an animal, for example. Even though each thing is only a small part of God, each animal, person, plant and thing has an equally important part. The lowly is as important as the high and mighty. Each learns according to his ability and moves toward perfection. All living things are divine.

Questions
1. What different types of knowledge did Spinoza define and which did he think is best?
2. What did Spinoza believe about living things?
3. What, according to Spinoza, should people do in their lives?

A Person’s Duty
A wise person will recognize that all things are part of God’s plan and each person should reach out to help people. When you hurt someone else you are hurting yourself. There is only one kind of aggression that is just; a universal aggressiveness for peace.

Freedom
The free man will desire nothing for himself that he will not desire for mankind. Man should be free from envy, hatred, ignorance and spite.
The Purpose of Life
People should work to make the world a better place by cultivating their own garden. People should get rid of the weeds that threaten good and beauty. People should take care of themselves rather than letting others take care of them. They should not be greedy. People should try to harmonize their plans with the plans of others.

The Source of Evil and Error
Superstition, intolerance, greed and oppression are the main problems of the world. Man is by nature a brutal sort. The chief wrong in the world is man’s inhumanity to man.

The Nature of God and Religion
Religion should be without superstition and sectarianism. There should be one religion for all. It should be a religion without ritual and without hate. The bible of the religion should be the Book of Nature. The best way to worship is by tending to one’s own business (cultivating one’s own garden) by freeing oneself of intolerance and superstition.

Improving Mankind and the Perfect Society
Voltaire did not believe in a perfect world. People are too greedy, intolerant and dishonest for that. He did believe that through education humans might become more enlightened and tolerant. Human beings are improved by civilization and by those who attempt to change laws for the betterment of people. He did not believe that people were capable of ruling themselves. He thought enlightened kings were better able to improve the condition of people. People, he thought, should “écrase l’infame,” destroy the infamy. The infamy was intolerance, greed and oppression.

The Nature of Man
All people who work are good. It is the idle that cause the problems.

Voltaire (1694-1778)
He was a French philosopher and playwright who lived in Paris. His writings were very popular.

Questions
1. What did Voltaire believe people should do to improve society?
2. Why didn’t Voltaire believe in a perfect world?
3. What kind of government did Voltaire believe in?
Great Ideas of the Age of Reason

The Nature of Man
Man is born with a blank mind (tabula rasa). Man has only the senses: taste, sight, smell, touch and hearing with which to absorb knowledge.

The Importance of Knowledge
The more that is known the less there is to argue about. Knowledge reduces intolerance. Man acquires knowledge through the senses; this is stored in the memory. It is used for thought and thought becomes reason. Man has different points of view and this leads to intolerance. Intolerance is due to our stubbornness which is caused by lack of knowledge.

The Perfect Society
All government and human relations should be based upon contractual consent. People should conduct their affairs like a business. People should agree what is to be given and for what price. People should develop mutual understanding and respect for one another. There should exist among people cooperative toleration. No one has the right to harm another in his life, health, liberty or pursuit of happiness. The government should protect these rights.

Improving Life and Government
Kings make laws for themselves. Therefore, government should be based upon consent of the majority of the governed. Government should have built-in checks and balances. If government fails and uses force against its citizens, then the citizens should use force to overturn the government.

Ethics and Virtue
Happiness is determined by the will of the people, not the king or a self-appointed person. Morality is the product of an individual's intuitive sense of good and bad. Virtue is action by a person guided by prudence. A person's prudence is based upon his knowledge and reason. God's laws can be discovered by empirical investigation.

John Locke (1632-1704)
He lived in England. He was a teacher and medical doctor. His ideas were a strong influence in the American Revolution.

Questions
1. What kind of government did Locke believe in?
2. Why is gaining knowledge important according to Locke?
3. What is the purpose of government according to Locke?

(looking at the real world) investigation.
Two of God's laws are "all men are created equal" and "men should help one another."

Property
Man can own private property which is the result of his labor; but he cannot own more than he needs until others have had a chance to get their share.