Human Perspectives in 18th-Century French Enlightenment Philosophy and Modern Implications for Vietnam

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Abstract
The eighteenth-century French Enlightenment marked a transformative era, fundamentally reshaping philosophical views on humanity by emphasizing reason, freedom, and human dignity. This paper explores how prominent Enlightenment philosophers, including Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire, conceptualized human origins, nature, reason, and liberation. Drawing parallels between these historic insights and contemporary Vietnam, the study suggests practical applications of Enlightenment values to modern Vietnamese society. Ultimately, the paper argues that promoting education, democratizing social life, and prioritizing human interests can significantly enhance Vietnam's human capital today.
Key words: French Enlightenment, human liberation, reason, human nature, Vietnam

Introduction

In the vibrant philosophical landscape of eighteenth-century France, Enlightenment thinkers sparked a radical shift by challenging traditional medieval perspectives on humanity. Figures such as Montesquieu (1689-1755), Rousseau (1712-1778), and Voltaire (1694-1778) moved away from viewing humans merely as passive creations of a divine order, positioning them instead as active agents capable of reason, self-awareness, and liberation (Bristow, 2023). These philosophers passionately argued for ideals captured famously in the motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," setting the intellectual groundwork for profound societal transformations, most notably the French Revolution of 1789. The movement's perspective on humanity emphasized the selective inheritance of the quintessence of humans, primarily the quintessence of Western culture. This included the humanistic thought of the Renaissance, the French humanistic tradition, and seventeenth-century English materialism (Morichère, 2010: 87).

Today, the insights and ideals of these Enlightenment thinkers remain strikingly relevant, particularly for countries that are undergoing complex transitions such as Vietnam. By reflecting on Enlightenment perspectives on human dignity and agency, Vietnamese society can find valuable frameworks for addressing contemporary social and developmental challenges. This paper examines core Enlightenment ideas about humanity and considers their implications for strengthening the human factor in present-day Vietnam, particularly through education reform, democratic governance, and social policies centred on human interests. Thus, by revisiting philosophical insights from the past, Vietnam may better chart a course toward a more equitable, free, and enlightened society.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative philosophical analysis, examining primary texts and secondary literature from Enlightenment thinkers and contemporary Vietnamese scholars. Through critical interpretation and comparative analysis, the paper identifies relevant philosophical principles and explores their practical implications for Vietnam's current socio-political context.

Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized into four main sections. First, it discusses Enlightenment views on human origins. Second, it explores the Enlightenment conceptions of human nature and reason. Third, it examines Enlightenment perspectives on human

liberation. Finally, the paper connects these historical insights to contemporary Vietnamese society, providing actionable recommendations for promoting human development.

2. *Central Elements of the Enlightenment's View on Human Beings*

The Enlightenment in France was a distinctive phenomenon which was linked with well-known thinkers such as Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire. It was regarded as a theoretical tool of the bourgeoisie in the period of preparation for the revolution. Consequently, the principles of Enlightenment profoundly shaped the philosophy of the era, including the view on humans.

Since ancient times, humans have become one of the basic topics in philosophy. However, each era approached and addressed this topic in different ways and contents. During the Middle Ages, because of being deeply influenced by the religious worldview and low level of production, humans were seen as passive beings only concerned with worshiping God and seeking baptism. Therefore, the question of whether this world was created by God or has existed as it has always been, was debated throughout the Middle Ages. Under the historical and social conditions of the time, philosophers struggled to find ways to help people escape from the constraints of the Church and its religious institutions. It was not in the Renaissance period that people truly explored their own identities. The Renaissance emphasis on honoring and glorifying man, with the image of free individuals as the center, and the shift from divine authority to human authority had a significant impact on French Enlightenment philosophy.

In the lead-up to the most typical democratic revolution in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century, the French Enlightenment thinkers inherited the humanistic ideals of the Renaissance and took their critique of theological scholasticism to its peak. Those Enlightenment thinkers, known as encyclopedists, paved the way for the age of reason that “broadened human understanding" (Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1962: 76). Therefore, it can be affirmed that human beings were the important object of study of the French Enlightenment philosophers. The viewpoints on humanity in the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment philosophy not only focused on the origin, nature, place and role of human beings, but also aimed at human liberation.

2.1. Human Origin: From Divine Creation to Natural Emergence

In the Enlightenment period, with scientific knowledge and belief in the invincibility of human reason, French Enlightenment thinkers believed that humans were products of nature. All of their characteristics and demands were material and natural while intelligence and conscience were viewed as “natural light”. La Mettrie argued that animals and plants in the inorganic natural world took various forms of material entities. He presented that animals evolve from plants, and humans were born from the animal world. Holbach stated that humans were products of nature, existing in nature, complying with its nature, and could not escape them. He also demonstrated that human intelligence depended on the body’s structure and sensory perception was crucial for understanding the natural laws. There was no immortal soul as well as no innate thought. Humans obtained their notions and ideas from the outside world (Morichère, 2010: 89). The doctrine of society was thus established based on the natural model, even religion was called Natural Religion. The French Enlightenment thinkers applied the concept of natural origin to advocate the struggle for social equality. “Nature" was one of the two key points (along with education) of Enlightenment philosophy in the critique of the previous hierarchical society. With the authority of nature, the Enlightenment thinkers used nature as an argument which gives people equal needs and dignity as well as "the natural light of reason". Starting from natural equality, the French Enlightenment thinkers asserted that people should

have equal social rights. In other words, nature was the foundation for equality. Enlightenment education was an approach designed to align people with natural principles and shape an enlightened and virtuous society. According to the Enlightenment thinkers, humans were born as not only products of nature, but also that of education. As educated individuals, humans were fully aware of their inherent laws and master some of them. For example, humans were born by nature with innate equality rights, should follow the principles of the social contract and the rules of reasonable selfishness, and individuals have sacred possession (Trang, 2023). Moreover, many Enlightenment thinkers acknowledged "nature" as the unique entity that could constitute all phenomena and objects and develop according to its own laws.

2.2. Human Nature: Between Mechanism and Morality

The eighteenth-century French Enlightenment thinkers expounded a mechanical and metaphysical view on human nature. La Mettrie perceived humans as machines with all their thoughts and ideas shaped by the structure of the body as well as by environmental influences and living conditions. Despite this view, La Mettrie stated that humans were not mere machines, but had the ability to think and perform moral behavior. Nguyen Tan Hung commented that "La Mettrie's machine is an organic, dynamic, and self-moving machine" (Nguyen, 2012: 425). This indicated that La Mettrie's materialistic perspective on humans did not differentiate between conscious, self-aware actions and unconscious, instinctive actions. La Mettrie initially advocated Descartes' application of mechanics to the study of the human body. La Mettrie firmly believed that "Descartes would be a man in every way worthy of respect, if, born in a century that he had not been obliged to enlighten, he had known the value of experiment and observation, and the danger of cutting loose from them… it must be seen that without him (Descartes) the field of philosophy, like the field of science without Newton, might perhaps be still uncultivated" (La Mettrie, 1996: 34-35). Later, La Mettrie radicalized and rejected Descartes' mind-body dualism. Influenced by mechanism, he imagined the human body as "a giant clock designed sophisticatedly" (La Mettrie, 1996: 34) with an extremely special operating mechanism. He presented that "If the wheel which moves the second hand stops, the wheel which moves the minute hand continues to turn, the wheel which moves the hour hand keeps moving and so do all the other parts. When these parts are rusted or dislocated for any reason, the whole machine will stop" (La Mettrie, 1996: 34-35).

From a materialistic perspective, the French Enlightenment thinkers affirmed the existence of humans. According to Voltaire, everyone has their own place and values in the universe; everyone should enjoy their life to the fullest and take responsibility for it without putting a hope in God; and everyone must do what they think is necessary and right. Humans cannot understand God's intentions, so the secular purpose of humans is to cultivate their own garden and focus on real life (Collin, 1908: 89). Humans are products of nature and a unity of body and mind. However, humankind in Enlightenment philosophy had mechanical and passive attributes that were disconnected from society. The development of natural sciences during this time was a factor that significantly influenced their philosophical ideals. The French Enlightenment philosophers indicated that humans were machines and, more broadly, human society was viewed as a system of interconnected machines in a metaphysical way (Kow, 2017).

In addition to the material nature, the French Enlightenment also paid attention to the spiritual nature of man. It was believed that human nature was not naturally evil. Society was evil because of deficiencies in social relationships and inappropriate education, which has not been enlightened. According to Diderot, humans have an innate tendency to support others and to benefit themselves. With proper education

and reinforcement, that natural moral virtue will be nurtured and positively strengthened.

From the perspective of egoism, the principle is to prioritize one's own life and allow others to do the same. Therefore, when it comes to humans, the French Enlightenment thinkers expounded on crude selfishness and reasonable selfishness in humans through this lens. They argued that humans were natural entities, all their traits, including self-interest, are determined by nature. Moreover, with physical nature, people always sought pleasure and avoid suffering, which was associated with self-love or self-preservation (the most important instinct). Only Rousseau admitted that altruism also existed in addition to selfishness (Inyikalum, 2017).

For this reason, everything people do is motivated by self-love. However, due to being enlightened by reason and conscience, humans realize that if they only care about themselves, they will face numerous challenges. Everyone wants to satisfy their needs, but they cannot do everything on their own. They gradually come to understand that they need to limit themselves to some extent. This action is motivated by self-love rather than love for others, therefore, it is not altruism, but reasonable selfishness that fosters peaceful coexistence. It can be seen that conscience plays a crucial role. Conscience motivates people to comply with the demands of reasonable selfishness. It is impossible to lead a normal life and keep the economic system running smoothly without considering and compromising the others' interests. Humans act like this because they have a sense of conscience and need to establish the principles of civil society. In a civil society, each citizen has the right to pursue their own goals, but self interest sometimes conflicts with the common interests of society. The general will is the collective interests of all citizens in the social contract. In summary, the civic society will unlock the potential for benefiting each individual (by reducing suffering and maximizing satisfaction) without harming personal benefits of all others.

2.3. The Primacy of Human Reason

When promoting human reason, the Enlightenment philosophers emphasized abolishing mystical and idealistic concepts of God. They proved the role of reason and education, and the significance of self-consciousness in shaping the world and society. Pham Nhu Cuong said that "life and ideologies are not absolutely special and distinct entities, but rather variations of living and thinking entities" (Pham, 1978: 133). When human beings are "enlightened", they can understand scientific achievements and master some values of the worldview.

The eighteenth-century French Enlightenment philosophers, known as writers and poets, conveyed their ideas of promoting human reason through literature and art. They revealed the flaws of religion and feudalism based on reason. Promoting human reason reflected the advanced ideas of the French bourgeoisie during that period. The eighteenth-century French Enlightenment philosophy affirmed the role of human intelligence in the development of society. They utilized the achievements of natural science to demonstrate the role of mankind in the development of civilization. They said that it was necessary to build a new society which liberated people from all forms of constraints, including intellectual development. Rousseau also affirmed that human history was not written by God, but it was the outcome of human activities - the subject in the process of historical movement. The history of human development was divided into three stages. Each stage was characterized by the specific level of economic development and form of ownership (Rousseau, 2010: 67).

As part of civil society, the Enlightenment thinkers prepared for the emergence of this subject by fostering judgment capacity. This ability is crucial to form a new subject. Judgment becomes an essential skill for individuals in civil society. It is distinguished from the capacity in the previous society where individuals often relied on dependent

thinking and authority. To some extent, judgment and the sovereign individual are identical.

Another factor is that judgment skills develop with a sense of conscience and right since these qualities are projected into the private daily life. The French Enlightenment thinkers regarded the abilities as one of the most important thinking abilities of their time. In fact, people always work towards their own goals and make efforts to achieve the goals at any cost. If people lack a sense of conscience, this will result in conflicts and eliminating compromise. Even worse, economic and political areas will be plunged into chaos. Therefore, conscience will help people live a peaceful life and avoid conflicts and disagreements, which secures their own interests without infringing on the interests of others. Rousseau believed that "the savage and the civilized man differ so much in the bottom of their hearts and in their inclinations, that what constitutes the supreme happiness of one would reduce the other to despair" (Rousseau, 2012: 306). Accordingly, it is vital to establish a state based on a new social contract to serve the interests, freedom and equality of all citizens. The achievement of enlightenment involves presenting and developing conscience as a special human capacity. As a result, the concept of an independent individual as a product of Western civilization was shaped, and this is also the unique feature of French Enlightenment philosophy.

In addition, French Enlightenment philosophers acknowledged that deism aroused the quintessence of ancient civilization and celebrated the strength and beauty of human beings. Deism refers that God is no longer the measure of all things. The realistic values of humankind are honoured; the image of a strong man holding his head high demanding freedom and truth has become the motto, ideology, and culture of social progress. Philosophers during this time period became more aware of the importance of humans in the development of intelligence and dignity.

2.4. Human liberation as Central Objective

The Enlightenment thinkers rejected and denied the role of religion or of any creator in their perspectives on humanity and its position in society. They also asserted that freedom and equality were natural human traits. Therefore, when witnessing a social reality full of contradictions, restrictions on freedom and good human nature, the Enlightenment thinkers sought to liberate people and society from oppression and injustice.

The Enlightenment thinkers concluded that human nature was freedom. but has been "corrupted" by society[1]. For this reason, human liberation is the process of guiding them back to their true nature. Voltaire said that "To be free, to have only equals, is the true, the natural life of man; all other ways of life are unworthy artifices, bad comedies in which one man plays the part of master, the other that of slave" (Dinh & Doan, 1998: 831). Therefore, the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment thinkers stated that education should be used as a transformative tool for liberating people from injustices. Education widens one's understanding and helps people access knowledge faster. It also helps people treat each other better and creates a more peaceful and orderly society. Holbach asserted that humanity could escape from feudalism by universalizing education, allowing reason to prevail over medieval obscurantism. He wanted a peaceful transition from feudalism to capitalism through

[1] "Corrupt" is defined as the action of changing the original form of something to a less good one. "The origin of the idea of corruption can be found in the representatives of the French (Rousseau) and German (Goth & Schleich) Enlightenment. Objectively, the idea represents a protest against the anti-humanity of private property relations." (*Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1986: 529).

"complete" legislation. Besides, Diderot demanded to govern society under the bourgeois democratic regime, expanding the educational system among citizens. Both strongly believed that equal educational opportunities for all individuals will nurture enlightened personalities and knowledge.

Through his writings, Rousseau emphasized that freedom was a natural state of human beings, but the reality of society prevented them from flourishing. In *The Social Contract*, he stated that "man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, 2010: 31). "Man is born free. The first law of freedom is that each person must take care of his or her own existence. The first concern is self-care" (Rousseau, 2010: 32). Furthermore, he also pointed out that humans naturally lived in community (the natural law of existence). Therefore, the social contract is created to transform people from individual selfishness and makes sure that everyone has freedom, equality and benefits. "The social contract does not destroy natural equality; it builds spiritual and legal equality to replace what nature has made man physically unequal. In terms of contracts and the rule of law, people are still wholly equal, although they are not equal in body and mind" (Rousseau, 2010: 51). According to Rousseau, "everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Maker of the world, but degenerates once it gets into the hands of man" (Rousseau, 2010: 31). His core belief was that evil and badness were not innate but were influenced and controlled by society and its education. Hence, it is necessary to establish an anti-oppressive education for children that enables them to understand and perform human functions in accordance with their natural state. Montesquieu also held progressive materialist views on human nature. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu discussed God as a maker and preserver of the universe by law. He almost rejected the role of the creator, claiming that natural law, not God, created human existence. Instead, it was humans who came up with the idea of God. When Montesquieu affirmed that the first law of human nature was peace and equality, we had to establish a legal system to bring people back to that first nature. "All men are born equal, but they cannot continue in this equality. Society makes them lose it, and they recover it only by the protection of the laws" (Montesquieu, 1996: 87). Therefore, besides education that enlightens and releases them from the constraints of contemporary society, it is crucial to form a contract as the general will of all individuals with a legal system to ensure human equality.

Continuing to develop the humanistic ideas of the Renaissance, French Enlightenment philosophy once again promoted the position of humans and raised the flag of the struggle to free them from the control of feudalism and the Church to give them freedom, equality, and happiness (Trang, 2023). Most Enlightenment thinkers chose human liberation as the main topic in their works. To liberate people and society, the Enlightenment thinkers first criticized the existing social order and everything that inhibited human freedom. According to Voltaire, "man is a social entity and the creative subject of history. Solidarity naturally exists in all individuals, guided by reason and emotion; humans cannot live alone and isolated in the animal state" (Dinh & Doan, 1998: 846). Rousseau fiercely criticized the artificial and fake social forms created by human reason because they were the major causes of degeneration of human nature in his belief. Social inequality is not inherent, but results from the root of private ownership. Rousseau argued that the state was a tool of tyranny and oppression of possessors over non-possessors. Together with Rousseau, Voltaire was also a champion against the feudal system and fought for the freedom of bourgeois democracy. The forward-thinking philosophical and political view had a profound influence on Voltaire's writing when he depicted the big picture of a feudal society with the dominance of evil and bad. Montesquieu also vigorously rejected the viewpoint that God shaped human life in the Middle Ages. He said that "even in ancient Rome, religion was a tool in the hands of political activists. According to him,

in modern society, the Church is a flatterer of the king, and when it cannot become a tyrant, it makes attempts to keep the people in ignorance" (Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1962: 113-114). Montesquieu's core belief exhibited the strong desire and aspiration for happiness and freedom of humanity. The view on human liberation in the French Enlightenment philosophy had a positive influence on the bourgeois revolution in France in 1789 (Marx & Engels, 1995: 401). Although the birth of capitalism had its limitations and people were not completely free, in terms of history, the perspective on human liberation in the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment philosophy affirmed that the new society inevitably triumphed over the outdated French feudal system.

3. Contemporary Applications: Enhancing the Human Factor in Modern Vietnam

Positioned at the crossroads of multiple civilisations, Vietnamese thought has long exhibited what scholars now call "cultural additivity," (Vuong et al., 2018) a pragmatic blending of Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist strands rather than their full merger (Nguyen & Do, 2020). Confucianism provided the institutional scaffolding—examination halls, genealogical piety and a literati elite—yet its moral universe was continually refracted through indigenous concerns for harmony with Heaven–Man–Earth (tam tài) and the yin–yang dynamics of an agrarian society first. Modern interpreters typically argue that this tradition remains humanistic but not anthropocentric, honouring human dignity (vi nhân) without severing humankind from the wider natural order. Appreciating this syncretic heritage helps explain why Vietnamese modernity could welcome Enlightenment notions of reason and rights while still grounding social ideals in communal solidarity and a deep respect for cosmic balance.

Human beings—*con người*—stand at the heart of every Vietnamese development strategy. The ultimate telos of socialism is "independence, freedom and happiness" for each citizen, the greatest of all collective benefits. Accordingly, throughout the revolutionary trajectory, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV, 2011; 2021) has affirmed that people are simultaneously *động lực* (driving force) and *mục tiêu* (destination) of đổi mới.

After national independence, the Vietnamese revolution entered its socialist stage, a project of human liberation that honours the country's humanistic tradition by "safeguarding people, minimising their sacrifices, and respecting their mission." Its guiding horizon remains the ideal of a "wealthy people, strong country, democracy, equality, and civilisation." The CPV therefore mobilises propaganda, education, and social policy so that the human factor is nourished while egoistic tendencies are exposed and overcome.

3.1 Human-Centred Directives from the 13th Party Congress

The 13th National Congress (2021) systematised a cultural-anthropological programme for the new era. The Congress documents proclaim that "people play a critical role as the centre, the most important subject and resource, and the goal of development; Vietnamese cultural values and people are the foundation, important endogenous strength to ensure sustainable development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021: 215-216). Echoing this, the 12th-tenure Central Committee insisted that all state activity must embody the maxim of "taking the people as the root," rely on their creativity, and "promote the strength of great national unity" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016: 69). Four decades of *đổi mới* confirm this orientation: the masses are the primary agents of development, not merely its beneficiaries (Nguyen Ngoc Ha, 2022).

President Hồ Chí Minh maintained that "to build socialism, there must be socialists." A Vietnamese socialist must unite **Đức** (morality) and **Tài** (talent), with morality as

the sine qua non of revolutionary practice. The forging of such personalities must therefore anticipate—and indeed guide—economic modernisation.

3.2 Strategic Measures for Strengthening the Human Factor

Drawing on Enlightenment conceptions of natural equality, reasonable self-interest, and the educative role of the state, contemporary Vietnam can advance the human factor through three mutually reinforcing measures:

First: Prioritising Human Interests. Enlightenment analyses of *amour-propre* teach that self-interest, properly channelled, propels collective progress. Socialism must therefore align policy with citizens' evolving material and spiritual needs. By harmonising interests and recalibrating social relations, law becomes an instrument of justice and a vehicle for the gradual internalisation of socialist values.

Second: Democratising Social Life. Liberation demands a social order in which the people exercise *quyền làm chủ* (the right of mastery). Inspired by Rousseau's social contract, Vietnam must expand both representative and direct democracy; combat formalism, extremism, and anti-system exploitation of democratic forms; and entwine popular participation with discipline, legality, and a reformed state apparatus capable of resisting bureaucracy and corruption.

Third: Revolutionising Education and Training. Following the Enlightenment conviction that education is the gateway to maturity, Vietnam designates education a "national policy of first priority." Echoing Hồ Chí Minh's dictum, "For the sake of ten years' benefit, we must plant trees; for the sake of a hundred years' benefit, we must cultivate the people," the sector must elevate intellectual standards, develop human resources, and form citizens who are both "moral" and "qualified." (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011) Ultimately, the aim is to "build a comprehensively developed Vietnamese culture and people, aiming for truth–goodness–beauty, imbued with national spirit, humanity, democracy and science. Culture is the spiritual foundation of society and an important endogenous strength for the sustainable development and safeguarding of the Fatherland, for the goal of rich people, strong country, democracy, fairness and civilisation" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011). Hence, we propose that by integrating Enlightenment insights with indigenous revolutionary humanism, these measures move Vietnam closer to a society in which every individual enjoys the freedom and dignity implicit in the socialist promise. This seems to be philosophically viable, socially desirable and overall commendable.

Conclusion

The eighteenth-century French Enlightenment offered a radically human-centred philosophy that re-cast humanity as a natural, rational and essentially free being. As Rousseau memorably insisted, "man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, 2010: 31). In declaring that freedom and equality flow from our shared nature, thinkers such as Montesquieu could argue that "all men are born equal, but they cannot continue in this equality… they recover it only by the protection of the laws" (Montesquieu, 1996: 87). These claims, anchored in reason rather than revelation, elevated education, science and a well-designed legal order to central instruments of human flourishing.

Yet the movement was also a child of its time. Its anthropology occasionally slipped into a mechanistic reduction of the person, and its ideal of liberty largely mirrored the aspirations of the emerging bourgeoisie. As our study has noted, Enlightenment materialism never fully shed metaphysical residues, and its programme for liberation did not immediately embrace all of humankind. Nevertheless, its core insights—confidence in human reason, a commitment to universal dignity, and the conviction that history is written by human hands—retain remarkable vitality today.

For contemporary Vietnam, these ideas can play a constructive role as we look for concrete paths forward. Prioritising citizens' interests, democratising social life, and revolutionising education are all important principles and should be taken seriously. We are convinced that these emphases are practical translations of the Enlightenment's call to align social institutions with natural equality and reasonable self-interest. Serious philosophical engagement with this legacy therefore remains indispensable. Ongoing research can deepen the dialogue between Western humanism and Vietnamese revolutionary humanism, ensuring that the country's development ethos continues to place con người at its centre.

In short, while the Lumières did not provide a flawless blueprint, they bequeathed a powerful methodological lesson: trust in human capacity, critique what hinders it, and build institutions that allow every person to think, act and live freely. By carrying that lesson into the twenty-first century, Vietnam—and indeed any society striving for justice—strengthens its claim to be, in the fullest sense, enlightened.

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