



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

*Charles River Editors*

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"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 with the transition to an adherence to reason, secularism, and promotion of values such as the value of the individual, 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 freedom of religion and 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 both his contemporaries and most of his modern readers know him, is widely regarded as the pinnacle of Enlightenment thought, the symbol of the era of reason.

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