

The
Scholars
Programme



Things Can Only Get Better: A Short History of Ideas about Progress

Key Stage 5 Programme

Pupil Name

Coursebook
Designed by

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Course Rationale

Does history move along a straight line, or round in a circle? Do things progress over time? We will critically explore how several European philosophers from different periods in the 'modern age' have viewed history and the concept of progress and consider how these ideas were shaped by their cultural and historical context.

We will be engaging with questions which remain highly relevant to the world we live in now. Why have some periods of history been so optimistic about things becoming steadily better? What is the impact on this belief of vast tragedies like the world wars of the 20th century? And what is the effect of believing that how things are now is the inevitable end point of past progress? Should we accept that choices which have been made in the past give us a better world than previously? Who benefits from instances of progress in society and who is left out?

During this course, we will be viewing history, not just as a series of past events, but as the study of how people in various periods have regarded the faults of the past, the possibilities of the future, and the process of change and development in their own times.

This course is inter-disciplinary, and it will enable you to start building knowledge in subject areas you may not have had the chance to study: that is, Philosophy, Politics, and the history of ideas. You will have the chance to engage with some of the major Western Philosophers of the modern age, such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx. This course will also provide valuable background for the future study of disciplines such as English and Comparative Literature and History of Art. You will also develop valuable skills in critical thinking and have the opportunity to develop and enrich your academic writing.

Cover Image: Joseph Wright of Derby, *A Philosopher Giving A Lecture at the Orrery*, c. 1765, oil on canvas, 147 x 203 cm (Derby Museum and Art Gallery, Derby, England). Sourced on Wiki Commons.

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Sample Tutorial Activity



Activity 1: Out of the dark

Below is a text that helps us to answer the question "what is the Enlightenment?"

- Read and highlight any keywords
- In pairs try and think of one question to ask the rest of the group about the text

"The Enlightenment is the period in the history of western thought and culture, stretching roughly from the mid-decades of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century, characterised by dramatic revolutions in science, philosophy, society and politics; these revolutions swept away the medieval worldview and ushered in our modern western world. Enlightenment thought culminates historically in the political upheaval of the French Revolution, in which the traditional hierarchical political and social orders (the French monarchy, the privileges of the French nobility, the political power and authority of the Catholic Church) were violently destroyed and replaced by a political and social order informed by the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality for all, founded, ostensibly, upon principles of human reason."

(William Bristow, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2010).

Activity 2: From Medieval to 18th century Europe

Look at the images and the table below. The statements describe various changes and developments that took place between the medieval period (5th – 15th Century), The Renaissance (15th – early 17th century, and the Enlightenment (late 17th – 18th Century).

How do each of the statements explain the differences between the sets of medieval images on the left and the sets of images from the Age of Enlightenment on the right?



Illustration of a turtle from a Medieval Bestiary.

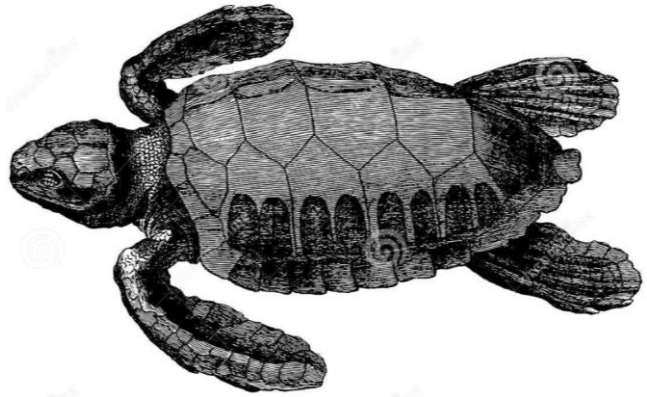


Illustration of a sea turtle from *The Encyclopédie* (Encyclopedia), edited by Diderot & D'Alambert in Paris, 1751-1772.



The Cameleopard from an edition of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, about 1356

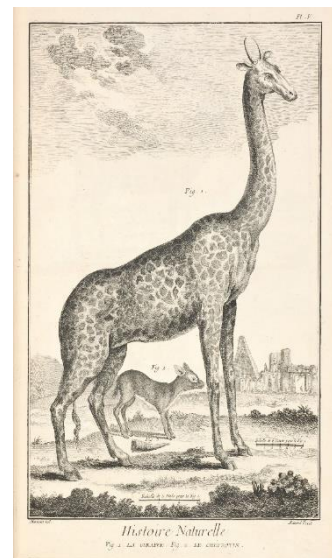


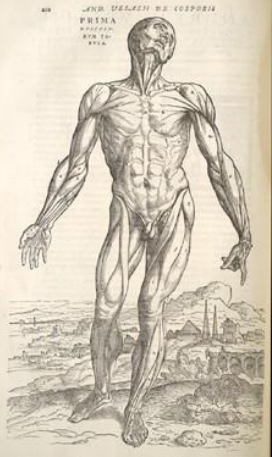
Illustration of a giraffe from the *Encyclopédie*.



Madonna and Child with Saints and Crucifixion by Berlinghieri, 1260-70



Woman Cleaning Turnips by Chardin, 1738.

| Statement | How does this explain the changes between the two sets of images? |
|--|---|
| <p>Medieval Europe was intensely religious.</p> <p>By the 18th century society became more secular. A secular society is one in which religion and government are separated and everyone was (theoretically) free to have their own faith.</p> | |
| <p>'Bestiaries' or illustrated books of animals were printed all over medieval Europe. Often the artist had never seen the beast in real life and relied on written description or previous illustrations.</p> <p>Many people believed in fantastic beasts such as unicorns and dragons.</p> <p>Often these books were made by monks, not trained artists. It was commonly believed that God created animals with certain characteristics to teach humans correct conduct. Animals were often used to represent virtues and vices.</p> | |
|  <p>In Britain, dissection was banned entirely until the 16th century. When it became permitted, physicians learnt a great deal about human anatomy. They produced detailed diagrams of the body which showed how the skeleton and muscles were structured.</p> <p>Artists around Europe, such as Leonardo Da Vinci, also began to carry out dissections and produce diagrams.</p> | |
| <p>In the 17th century thinkers began to question ancient wisdom and begin to make huge advancements in the sciences. The <u>empirical or scientific method</u> of observation and experimentation was seen as very important in the Enlightenment.</p> | |
| <p>For the first time, many Westerners travelled to other continents and were able to observe the flora and fauna (plants and animals) of other countries. It is important to remember that Westerners were not just visiting these places but also <u>colonising</u> them. They displaced, enslaved, and killed native people, and often destroyed the natural environment to enrich their own countries.</p> | |
| <p>Renaissance Perspective was developed in the 16th century.</p> | |

Extension: Diderot's Encyclopédie

All this rational, observational questioning extended to other areas of life, notably religion & politics. Read this quotation from the article on the aims & importance of the Encyclopedia by its editor, Diderot. In pairs, answer the following questions.

- What effect does this bold attitude have on other areas of society and culture apart from science?
- What does Diderot mean by "good taste"? What subjects might it be considered bad taste to discuss and question?

"I have said that the Encyclopédie can be produced only in a philosophical century and I said so because the entire work demands a bolder outlook than is usually found in faint-hearted centuries which are preoccupied with good taste. Everything must be brought to light, boldly, without exceptions and unsparingly." Denis Diderot (1751)
