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Kultura i Wartości
ISSN 2299-7806
Nr 39 (2025)

http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/kw.2025.39.9-22

An Expansive View of Truth and a Non-Pessimistic Conception of Human Nature: The Form and Content of Enlightenment Philosophy

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This article characterizes the Enlightenment by identifying it on a formal level with an expansive view of truth and on a content-level with a non-pessimistic conception of human nature. These two traits differentiate the Enlightenment from other forms of free thought that were already present in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular, they differentiate it from Libertinism, in which, on the level of content, it is possible to find many of the theses later advocated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. For instance, regarding religious issues, we already find beliefs of a deist, atheist and agnostic nature developed in the libertine thought. But in the libertine vision such truths were not to be disseminated. They were to remain the secret patrimony of the aristocratic elite, since it was socially and politically dangerous for people to learn that revealed religions are false or that God does not exist. Moreover, in the libertine thought we find a pessimistic conception of human nature. With the Enlightenment both characteristics of the freethinking prevalent in the seventeenth century disappear.

Keywords: Enlightenment, libertinism, human nature, truth, anthropological pessimism, Voltaire, Pascal

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Introduction

In this paper I will try to characterize the Enlightenment by distinguishing a form and content that define its philosophy. My theses will focus in particular on the French Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment was a cultural movement that revolutionized European and non-European thought in the eighteenth century. If we ask ourselves what its distinctive features were on a philosophical level, I think we need to refer to two main factors, one formal and one content-related, connected to each other. In my article I intend to argue that as a form the Enlightenment consists in an expansive view of truth and as a content in a non-pessimistic conception of human nature. I will dedicate the next paragraph to the formal aspect of the Enlightenment and the following paragraph to the content aspect. In the final paragraph I will argue that these ideas are found in the philosopher who symbolically embodies the beginning of the Enlightenment, and in particular in his text which is considered by many to have started this new movement of ideas.

Two Different Attitudes Towards the Truth

It is worth emphasizing that many of the contents of the Enlightenment philosophy, for example with respect to religion, were already present in the free thought of the seventeenth century, and especially in the ideas of Libertinism. I am thinking of scholars like La Mothe Le Vayer, Fontenelle, Fréret, Bayle, etc.

Already then, beliefs of a deistic nature or agnostic nature or atheistic or materialist nature had developed, such as those that the Enlightenment philosophers would advocate. In fact, already in libertine thought we can find the thesis according to which God exists, but all revealed religions (i.e. all positive religions) are false (deism's main assumption); or the thesis according to which we are unable to determine whether God exists (which is what agnosticism asserts[1]); or the thesis

[1] As is known, this is a thesis inaugurated in Western philosophical thought by the sophist Protagoras in one of his most famous passages. Although the term agnosticism was far from being born (as is equally well known, it is a word introduced by the English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869 at a meeting of the Metaphysical Society in London; see Huxley, *Agnosticism: A Symposium*, in *The Agnostic Annual*, ed. Charles Watt (London: Cattell, 1884), 5–6.

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according to which God does not exist (what is affirmed by atheism); or, again, the thesis according to which there is only one substance in the universe, matter, and therefore the soul is not immortal (what is affirmed by materialism).

These are conceptions that will be defended by the main enlighteners. For example, by Voltaire, who was a deist and was a supporter of natural religion, based on reason;[2] by d'Alembert, who was agnostic (but if we refer to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we could also mention Kant[3]); by d'Holbach who was an atheist;[4] by La Mettrie and Diderot, who were materialists.[5] So it is not in these theses that we can find the specific elements that characterize the Enlightenment.

I believe that the novelty of the Enlightenment thought consists first of all in the *different* attitude towards those *common* truths (and here we find the formal

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In antiquity, although not yet at the time of Protagoras, philosophical positions that considered the question of the existence of the Gods beyond what was knowable were indicated by the term "skepticism."

[2] See, for example, Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance* [1763], English translation: *A Treatise on Tolerance and Other Writings*, ed. Brian Masters (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[3] See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [1781, revised second edition 1787]; English translation: *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[4] See Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach, *Système de la nature, ou des Lois du Monde Physique et du Monde Moral* [1770, 2 volumes]; English translation: *System of Nature*, ed. Robert D. Richardson (New York: Garland Press, 1984).

[5] For Julien Offray de La Mettrie, see *L'homme machine* [1748], English translation: *Man a Machine* (La Salle, ILL: Open Court Press, 1912); for Denis Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* [1754] (Paris: Flammarion, 2005). Obviously very often atheists and materialists coincide. Who is a materialist is also an atheist and vice versa: La Mettrie and Diderot, in addition to being materialists, were also atheists (for Diderot this was true for the last part of his life; previously he was a deist); and d'Holbach in addition to being an atheist was a materialist. But the two concepts are not extensionally equivalent (and there is no two-way correspondence between them). One can be a materialist without being an atheist (this is the case with Voltaire, who believes in God, but not in the immortality of the soul; or with Hobbes, for whom there is only one substance, matter, and therefore everything is material, even God); and one can be an atheist without being a materialist (a position well exemplified by the twentieth century British philosopher Charlie Dunbar Broad, for whom God does not exist, but after our bodily death we will survive in a spiritual dimension, well attested to by the phenomena of parapsychology). More generally, therefore, we can say that atheism and materialism are *logically autonomous* (two theses or two concepts A and B are logically autonomous if A does not imply

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element I referred to). For the libertines, such truths had to remain the secret patrimony (the secret heritage) of a small circle of enlightened spirits, of an aristocratic elite, because their diffusion among the popular classes would have been extremely dangerous: it would have generated revolutions, anarchy; it would have jeopardized the *status quo* (the established order).[6]

The libertines were philosophically skeptical, but from a political point of view they were conservatives. They were anti-revolutionary, against any social change. Their reasoning was as follows: If the common or ordinary people had come to know that God does not exist and that after death there is no heaven and hell, which would have compensated for their submission in earthly life, they would no longer have accepted their condition and would have rebelled. In the libertine perspective, therefore, religions, though false, are useful and should be preserved: theoretical wrongness, practical utility (religion as *instrumentum regni*, as Machiavelli had already said). We might say in other terms that the libertines adopted the Latin motto *intus ut libet, foris ut moris est* ("in private according to pleasure, in public according to custom;" or: "indoors as we please, in public as is customary").

So in the libertine perspective there is a split between truth and utility. The truth belongs to a few and it is desirable that it be so. Religion is a human construction and it does not have a natural origin; it is a mistake, but a useful mistake, because a society without religion would be a leap in the dark. No order is as bad as moral and political disorder. And in order for religion to fulfil its function of utility it is necessary that in addition to the existence of God, people also believe in the immortality of the soul.

To mask their anti-Christian theses, the libertines used the "double-truth theory," which allowed them to avoid problems (censorship or condemnation) with the constituted authorities. A theory of medieval origin, but which is also

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B and B does not imply A; that is, if I can support A and deny B without contradicting myself and I can support B and deny A without contradicting myself).

[6] For example, Fontanelle denies the reality of human free will, but believes that this truth should not be spread, due to its dangerousness. See Bernard Le Bouvier de Fontanelle, *Nouvelles libertés de penser* [1743], in *Oeuvres Complètes de Fontenelle*, ed. Georges-Bernard Depping, (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1968), II, 616. Fréret asserts that the thesis according to which the soul is not immortal should not be disseminated, see: Nicolas Fréret, *Lettre de Thrasibule à Leucippe*, ed. Sergio Landucci (Firenze: Olschky, 1986). And so on.

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found in the Italian Renaissance philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi.[7] The double-truth theory was the view according to which religion and philosophy, as separate sources of knowledge, might arrive at contradictory truths, but the man of faith sacrifices the truth of reason to the truth of faith. So in the texts of the libertines we find written, for example, that reason would seem to tell us that miracles are not possible, but since this goes against the Holy Scriptures, we cannot accept it and we must conform to the sacred texts. This happened in the works of the libertines that were published, but, as is known, most of their writings were not published and they circulated only clandestinely. They passed from hand to hand, because it was too dangerous for them to come out publicly.[8]

The attitude towards the propagation of truth is completely different among the Enlightenment philosophers. In the texts of thinkers such as Voltaire, d'Holbach, Diderot etc. we find criticisms of the attitude of libertinism towards truth. In the Enlightenment conception truth should be propagated as much as possible, indeed this is the primary task of philosophers. As the Italian Enlightenment philosopher Gaetano Filangeri wrote,

> The philosopher must be an apostle of truth […]. As long as the truth known by a few privileged men is hidden from the greater part of mankind and will appear far from the thrones, the duty of the philosopher is to preach it, to support it, to promote it, to illustrate it. If the Lights he spreads are not useful for his century and for his country, they will certainly be useful for another century and for another country.[9]

Filangeri's thesis had been defended against the libertine attitude in particular by d'Holbach. This French philosopher, of German origin, in *Le Bons Sense* asserts that "truth, always necessary to man, is made to be understood by all sane

[7] See, for example, Pietro Pomponazzi, *Tractatus de immortalitate animae* (*On the Immortality of the Soul*) [1516]. French translation: *Traité de l'immortalitaté de l'âme*, ed. Thierry Gontier (Paris: Les Belle Lettres, 2012).

[8] On the phenomenon of clandestine literature, see Gianni Paganini, *La philosophie clandestine* (Paris: Puf, 2005).

[9] Gaetano Filangeri, *La scienza della legislazione* [1780–1785] (Mariano del Friuli: Laguna, 2003–2004), book II, 1780, XXXVIII. English translation is mine.

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minds."[10] And after all, this program is already inherent in the very term "enlightenment," which, using the metaphor of light, refers to the need to illuminate brighten people's minds. And thus free them from the darkness of ignorance, fanaticism, superstition to create a better world. We can say, therefore, that the idea of propaganda is intrinsic to the Enlightenment. In the Enlightenment we no longer find the idea of dangerous truths, not to be spread. From this specific point of view it is difficult to see in the thought of the libertines a sort of pre-Enlightenment. From a formal point of view I would say that it is not so. Libertinism anticipates the Enlightenment in terms of content, but from a formal point of view there is a significant difference between the two movements of thought.

Pessimism vs. Non-pessimism About Human Nature

But I mean to argue—and so we arrive at the second point (the second thesis characterizing the Enlightenment)—that such a different attitude towards truth on the part of the Enlightenment thinkers compared to the libertine thinkers is connected, also and above all, to an important difference on the level of content. A difference of an anthropological nature. The Enlightenment's anthropology turns out not to be as pessimistic as that characterizing much of the seventeenth century, both on the theological and philosophical levels. From this point of view, Catholic and Lutheran theology and Hobbes' philosophy are two sides of the same coin: both express an extremely pessimistic perspective on human nature. In the religious vision, man is a being whose nature, because of original sin, is hopelessly turned to evil and only an intervention of divine grace can save him/her. In the secular vision, the human being in the state of nature is devoid of altruistic motives that are not instrumental. The works of Hobbes, I am thinking of *Leviathan*

[10] D'Holbach, *Le Bons Sense* (London, 1772), *Preface* (English translation is mine); reprint Paris: Editions rationalists, 1971. D'Holbach develops this topic organically in *Essai sur les préjugés, ou De l'influence des opinions sur les moeurs & le bonheur des hommes* (Londres, 1770), 18–93; reprint Paris: Coda, 2007.

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and *De Cive*,[11] attest to a negative anthropological framework, which at an empirical level seemed to be confirmed by the travel reports that come from the newly discovered American continent, where the inhabitants of those places are described as devoid of morality and religion. Obviously these reports were wrong. Because those who wrote them were not suited to understand the customs of a people. They were not ethnologists (ethnology as a science did not yet exist; it would develop only in the second half of the nineteenth century). They were traders, or they were priests, so from their point of view whoever worshipped a snake or a stone was equivalent to an atheist. From their point of view those were certainly not religions. Today we know that this is not the case. Far from being atheists, the populations of pre-Columbian America were extremely religious.[12]

These pessimistic theses on human nature, which dominate the thought of the seventeenth century, find support also in the reflections of the so-called precursors or forerunners of the Enlightenment, namely the libertines. Such theses can be found, for example, in the pages of Pierre Bayle. I am thinking of texts such as *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* (1682) and *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697).[13]

With the Enlightenment this pessimistic picture about human nature is abandoned. Now either human nature is evaluated as even good, or in any case it is not considered bad (it contains positive and negative elements); or it has neutral characteristics and is malleable (human being has a plastic nature). We can find the first thesis in Rousseau. To tell the truth, Rousseau was one of the few Enlightenment philosophers to maintain that man is good and that it is society that perverts its nature.[14] The prevailing thesis among the Enlightenment thinkers is the

[11] See Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, Paris [1642], English translation, ed. Howard Warrender (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), first section; id., *Leviathan* [1651], in *Leviathan, with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

[12] These themes are well reconstructed in Sergio Landucci, *I filosofi e i selvaggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014).

[13] See Pierre Bayle, *Pensées diverses sur le comète* [1682], English translation *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000); Id., *Dictionnaire historique et critique* [1697, 1704 second edition], English translation, with the title *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle* (London, Knapton, 1734; reprint New York: Garland Publishing, 1984).

[14] In this regard, see in particular Jean-Jaques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* [1755], English translation: *Discourse on the*

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second one. The thesis according to which human nature contains positive and negative elements. For example, this is the opinion of Voltaire and Hume. As Hume says in his *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (a text published in 1751), "there is some benevolence, however small, […] some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent."[15]

Another widely held thesis among the Enlightenment is that human nature has neutral characteristics; and, therefore, is malleable. This aspect was especially emphasized by Helvétius. In his view, Man is corrupt, he is the author of many wicked deeds, but this does not depend on his nature, nor on his fall following original sin. There are historical reasons that explain man's negative behavior. Man's negativity is a product of history. Man has been dominated by false ideas, by false conceptions. He has been prey to superstitions. All this is not a necessary consequence of human nature. Man depends on the ideas that are put into his head. Let's put good ideas into his head and he will behave well. The basic concept here is that of a malleable human nature, rather than one that is negatively or positively charged. Man is the fruit of education. Man is the product of the education he is given. Do you want a new man? Change his education, his culture, his behavior patterns. Helvetius will go so far as to say that education can do everything (he attributes everything to education and nothing to nature; he goes so far as to say that all men would be equal in terms of intellectual capacity if they had all had the same education).[16]

Now, the other Enlightenment philosophers do not go as far as such extreme theses, but in any case they share the idea that human nature is not hopelessly

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Origin of Inequality (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1992); id., *Émile, ou de l'Éducation* [1762], English translation: *Emile or On Education*, ed. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979). On the thesis of the original goodness of man in Rousseau, see Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Joshua Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), chap. 4.

[15] David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751](Chicago: Open Court, 1930), 109.

[16] See Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De l'homme, de ses facultés intellectuelles et de son éducation* [1772], English translation: *A Treatise of Man, His Intellectual Faculties and His Education* (New York: Franklin, 1969); anastatic reprint of the 1810 edition, especially volume II, section X.

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turned to evil, the human being is not an insincere, selfish animal etc. His behaviors can be improved if he is freed from wrong ideas. And it is for this reason that the truth can be spread without fear of harmful effects. We must act on the mentality of others to change it, to free it from prejudices.

Voltaire's *The Anti-Pascal* as the Beginning of the Enlightenment

These ideas are found in the philosopher symbol of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, considered by many to be the spiritual father of such new cultural movement. In this regard there is an interesting thing to point out. At the beginning of the 1730s, Voltaire wrote one of his most famous texts, *Letters Concerning the English Nations* (which in first edition came out in 1733). In the second edition of this work, published in 1734, he added to the twenty-four letters of the first edition a twenty-fifth letter, the only one in the volume not written during his three-year exile in London (an exile that lasted from 1726 to 1729).[17] This letter focused on a topic completely unrelated to the previous twenty-four. The previous twenty-four were about England, they were a eulogy (a praise) of English institutions. Voltaire describes England as a country where freedom and tolerance reign. Instead, in the twenty-fifth letter Voltaire talks about Pascal. In fact, its title is *Letter XXV. On Mr. Pascal's* Pensées (it is also called "the anti-Pascal").[18] It consists of fifty-seven remarks on the French mathematician, philosopher and theologian. It is a strange juxtaposition. In this letter Voltaire harshly criticizes Pascal. Pascal was the great philosopher who had placed at the center of his reflection the misery and corruption of man following original sin. He was a Jansenist and like all Jansenists he attributed to original sin harmful effects on human nature.[19] According

[17] Voltaire, *Lettres écrites de Londres sur les Anglois et autres sujets* [1734]. English translation: *Philosophical Letters. Or, Letters Regarding the English Nations*, ed. John Leigh and Prudence L. Steiner (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007).

[18] See ibidem, 101–122.

[19] See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1670). French edition: ed. Philippe Sellier (Paris: Bordas/Classiques Garnier, 1991). English translation in *Pensées and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). In Pascal anthropological pessimism is influenced by Augustinian anti-Pelagian thought, which, through late medieval voluntarism, also acts on Hobbes.

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to Pascal, "All men by nature hate one another. We have tried, as best we could, to make concupiscence serve the common good. But it is only pretense, and a false image of charity: because in the end it is always hatred."[20] In another of his *Pensées* he asserts: "Imagine a great number of men in chains, all condemned to death, some of whom are slaughtered every day before the eyes of the others; those who remain see their own fate in that of their fellow men; and, looking at one another with sorrow and without hope, await their turn. This is the image of the human condition."[21]

Voltaire, commenting *Pascal's Thoughts*, attacks his conception by defending the nature of man as not irremediably corrupt. In the human being there are mixed components of good and components of evil, as Hume will later say[22]. There are negative and positive elements in human beings, but human nature is not compromised. Pascal's conception according to Voltaire is unacceptable:

> I respect Pascal's genius and eloquence but […] It is seems to me on the whole that the spirit in which M. Pascal wrote these *Pensées* was to show man in an odious light. He is determined to paint us all as wicked and miserable. He attacks human nature much as he attacked the Jesuits: he imputes to human nature that which is true only for some men; he eloquently insults the human race. I dare to take humanity's part against this sublime misanthrope. I dare to affirm that we are neither so wicked nor so miserable as he claims.[23]

And in the following pages he raises the tone of the polemic against Pascal by asserting that to consider the universe a dark prison, and all men criminals waiting to be executed, is a fanatical idea.[24]

One could argue that this letter constitutes the birth certificate of the Enlightenment. It should be considered, however, that this critical attitude towards Pascal and more generally against pessimism about human nature outside France was already present in the English deist thought of philosophers such as Herbert of

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[20] Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, 125.

[21] Ibidem, 110.

[22] Of course, it must be stressed that Voltaire's non-pessimism is not of a metaphysical nature, because otherwise he, who criticizes Leibniz's metaphysical optimism (see *Candide, ou l'Optimisme*), would fall into contradiction.

[23] Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, 101.

[24] See ibidem, 110.

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Cherbury and Shaftesbury. In their texts we can already find the non-pessimism on human nature and the criticism of the dogma of original sin. And surely Voltaire draws on these sources to elaborate his criticism. From this point of view we could say that the historical roots of the Enlightenment are to be found more in English deist thought than in libertinism. The deists were more precursors of the Enlightenment than the libertines.

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Streszczenie

Szerokie rozumienie prawdy i niepesymistyczne ujęcie natury ludzkiej: forma i treść filozofii Oświecenia

Niniejszy artykuł charakteryzuje filozofię Oświecenia poprzez jej dwie zasadnicze cechy: na poziomie formalnym – szerokiej koncepcji prawdy oraz na poziomie treściowym – niepesymistycznego ujęcia natury ludzkiej. Właśnie te dwa elementy odróżniają Oświecenie od innych form wolnomyślicielstwa, które istniały już w XVII i XVIII wieku. W szczególności odróżniają je od libertynizmu, w którym – na poziomie treści – odnaleźć można wiele tez, które później stały się charakterystyczne dla myślicieli oświeceniowych. Przykładowo, w kwestiach religijnych już w myśli libertynów pojawiają się stanowiska o charakterze deistycznym, ateistycznym

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czy agnostycznym. Jednakże w ramach libertynizmu prawdy tego rodzaju nie miały być upowszechniane. Powinny pozostawać wyłączną domeną arystokratycznej elity, ponieważ ich rozpowszechnienie uznawano za społecznie i politycznie niebezpieczne – mogło bowiem prowadzić do podważenia autorytetu religii objawionej bądź zakwestionowania istnienia Boga. Co więcej, libertynizm opierał się na pesymistycznej wizji natury ludzkiej, zakładającej jej fundamentalną ułomność i irracjonalność. Obie te cechy – elitarystyczna koncepcja prawdy oraz antropologiczny pesymizm – zostają przezwyciężone przez filozofię Oświecenia. Oświeceniowi myśliciele opowiadają się za powszechnym dostępem do prawdy oraz za optymistycznym przekonaniem o zdolności człowieka do rozumu, postępu i moralnego doskonalenia się.

Słowa kluczowe: Oświecenie, libertarianizm, ludzka natura, prawda, pesymizm antropologiczny, Wolter, Pascal

Zusammenfassung

Ein umfassendes Verständnis der Wahrheit und eine nicht-pessimistische Sichtweise der menschlichen Natur: Form und Inhalt der Philosophie der Aufklärung

Der vorliegende Artikel charakterisiert die Philosophie der Aufklärung anhand ihrer beiden wesentlichen Merkmale: auf formaler Ebene – ein umfassendes Verständnis von Wahrheit und auf inhaltlicher Ebene – eine nicht pessimistische Sichtweise der menschlichen Natur. Genau diese beiden Elemente unterscheiden die Aufklärung von anderen Formen des Freidenkertums, die bereits im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert existierten. Insbesondere unterscheiden sie sich vom Libertinismus, in dem – auf inhaltlicher Ebene – viele Thesen zu finden sind, die später für die Denker der Aufklärung charakteristisch wurden. So tauchen beispielsweise in religiösen Fragen bereits in den Gedanken der Libertins deistische, atheistische oder agnostische Positionen auf. Im Rahmen des Libertinismus sollten solche Wahrheiten jedoch nicht verbreitet werden. Sie sollten ausschließlich der aristokratischen Elite vorbehalten bleiben, da ihre Verbreitung als sozial und politisch gefährlich angesehen wurde – sie hätte nämlich dazu führen können, dass die Autorität der offenbarten Religion untergraben oder die Existenz Gottes in Frage gestellt worden wäre. Darüber hinaus basierte der Libertinismus auf einer pessimistischen Sichtweise der menschlichen Natur, die von ihrer grundlegenden Unvollkommenheit und Irrationalität ausging. Beide Merkmale – die elitäre Auffassung von Wahrheit und der anthropologische Pessimismus – werden durch die Philosophie der Aufklärung überwunden. Die Denker der Aufklärung befürworten den allgemeinen Zugang zur Wahrheit und eine optimistische Überzeugung von der Fähigkeit des Menschen zu Vernunft, Fortschritt und moralischer Vervollkommnung.

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Data: 01/11/2026 15:37:24

Schlüsselworte: Aufklärung, Libertarismus, menschliche Natur, Wahrheit, anthropologischer Pessimismus, Voltaire, Pascal

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