**Age of Reason Philosophers**

***A Closer Look***

**Great Minds Do Not Think Alike**

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the French essayist Michel de Montaigne created a medallion with a motto encapsulating his life and work: *Que scay-je?* or “What do I know?” His question is the central theme of his time—the Age of Rationalism.

During the Renaissance, artists and thinkers celebrated human potential. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans recognized the vast power of the mind itself. The power of thought forced tradition and complacency deeper into the shadows.



**Niccolo Machiavelli—The Mind as a Weapon**

The idea of the mind as a political tool found practical expression in the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527). As a diplomat for the Florentine republic, Machiavelli observed firsthand how governments should, and should not, be run. After enduring prison and exile, he wrote one of the world’s most influential books of political theory—*The Prince.*

In Machiavelli’s view, a ruler maintains control not with goodness but with strength and mental agility. A Machiavellian ruler must possess both force and cunning without sentiment. Rather than loving his subjects and cherishing peace, Machiavelli’s prince seeks first and foremost to retain and extend his power. He is wily, aggressive, and ruthless, and his greatest weapon is his mind.

**Blaise Pascal—The Dialogue of Reason and Religion**

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), French mathematician, physicist, and religious philosopher, pondered problems both earthly and heavenly. At the age of twelve he independently rediscovered Euclid’s first thirty-two propositions of geometry. He later engineered the world’s first calculator.

Pascal sought harmony between mathematical certainty and moral truth. In 1657, he began writing his *Penseés,* short philosophical “thoughts” that integrate science and spirituality. Some of Pascal’s *penseés* reveal his logical mind, while others reveal his more poetic side. All argue his fundamental idea that the human nature is a paradox—a logical contradiction.

Pascal’s paradox is that the mind has vast power but is virtually powerless in comparison with the infinite. Human beings are, therefore, “incapable of absolute ignorance and of certain knowledge.”

As if to answer Montaigne’s “What do I know?” Pascal believed that we do know many things, and yet we do not really know much at all.

**John Locke—Reason and Revolution**

To the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), the human mind is a blank slate. Locke believed that everything we experience make impressions on that blank slate. In this approach, called empiricism, the consciousness of every human being develops according to personal experience, reflections, and decisions.

Locke was also a highly influential political philosopher. In his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), Locke argued that people are free to choose their own government. Locke reasoned that the government has a rational purpose—to protect life, liberty, and property. If it fails, it may be overthrown. Thomas Jefferson and other founders of the American Republic were deeply influenced by Locke’s ideas.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau—The Social Contract**

The most extraordinarily multifaceted mind to emerge during the Age of Rationalism was that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Orphan, footman, music teacher, tutor, encyclopedic writer, political philosopher, social critic, novelist, autobiographer, wanderer, radical, free spirit—Rousseau was all of these and more. For Rousseau, civilization corrupted humanity’s natural goodness. He believed that people are fundamentally good, but society has made it impossible for the best in human nature to flourish; therefore, a new social order needs to be created. In *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau described a society in which a ruler leads at the will of the people, who can revoke their support if they wish. The social contract achieved its most complete embodiment in American democracy. Rousseau’s devotion to nature and his belief in the unique and passionate individual make him the intellectual bridge to the Age of the Romantics.