



THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT



Joseph Wright, *Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768)

THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

- ▶ Caveat: there was no “project” –we saw one afterward, a way of organizing and simplifying lots of different individuals with different ideas
- ▶ The positive idea: with reason, we can improve our world, bettering not only our knowledge and technology, but also our institutions and society; we can abolish the old hierarchies of inherited position and power, and create a new society with equality of opportunity for all: universal human rights
- ▶ This was pretty radical stuff



THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

- ▶ We could, in theory, increase human happiness, freedom, justice and even virtue...
- ▶ ...*if* we could understand and integrate human behavior into our various spheres of knowledge – things like psychology, economics, sociology, anthropology and political science
- ▶ To do this would necessitate jettisoning (or at least radically questioning and critiquing) old traditions, assumptions, hierarchies, and structures. New knowledge will emerge from skeptical inquiry and rational debate.



RENÉ DESCARTES

1596-1650

- ▶ frame story (the 30 Years War)
- ▶ methodological skepticism
 - ▶ thought must have *unity*, and...
 - ▶ certainty, analysis, progression, completeness and...
 - ▶ it must beware of *error*
- ▶ Cartesian dualism:
materialism vs. the cogito



There is seldom so much perfection in works composed of many separate parts, upon which different hands had been employed, as in those completed by a single master. Thus it is observable that the buildings which a single architect has planned and executed, are generally more elegant and commodious than those which several have attempted to improve, by making old walls serve for purposes for which they were not originally built.

The first was never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; to comprise nothing more in my judgment than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt.

The second, to divide each of the difficulties under examination into as many parts as might be necessary for its adequate solution.

The third, to conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex.

And the last, in every case to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general, that I might be assured that nothing was omitted.

Accordingly, seeing that our senses sometimes deceive us, I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really such as they presented to us; and because some men err in reasoning, even on the simplest matters of geometry, I rejected as false all the reasonings I had hitherto taken for demonstrations; and finally, when I considered that the very same thoughts (presentations) which we experience when awake may also be experienced when we are asleep, I supposed that all the objects (presentations) that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams.

But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be; and as I observed that this truth, *I think, therefore I am* (COGITO ERGO SUM), was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the skeptics capable of shaking it.

I could suppose that I had no body, and that there was no world nor any place in which I might be; but that I could not therefore suppose that I was not; I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking. "I," that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body.

RENÉ DESCARTES

- ▶ Descartes gives a philosophical method for radical critique and questioning – based on escaping the world and the body, and imagining himself a pure geometrical point of rationality
- ▶ In doing so, Descartes not only kept “the ghost the machine,” but also failed to recognize that not everyone has the privilege of forgetting about their bodies



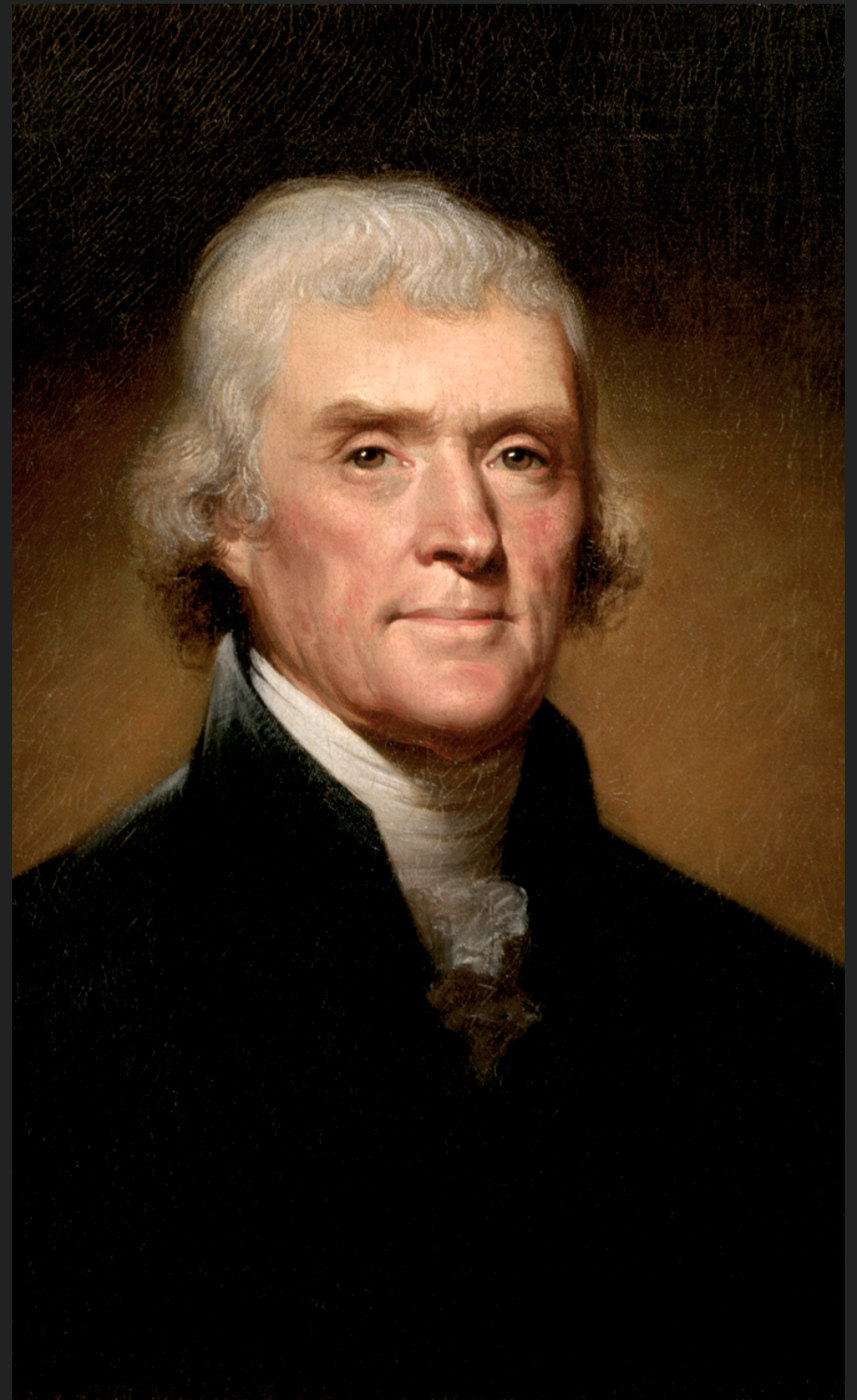






THOMAS JEFFERSON 1743-1826

- ▶ social contract allows for radical change
- ▶ universal, rational subject: "all men created equal"
- ▶ government as rational enterprise
- ▶ nothing given *a priori*; Locke's empiricism



When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

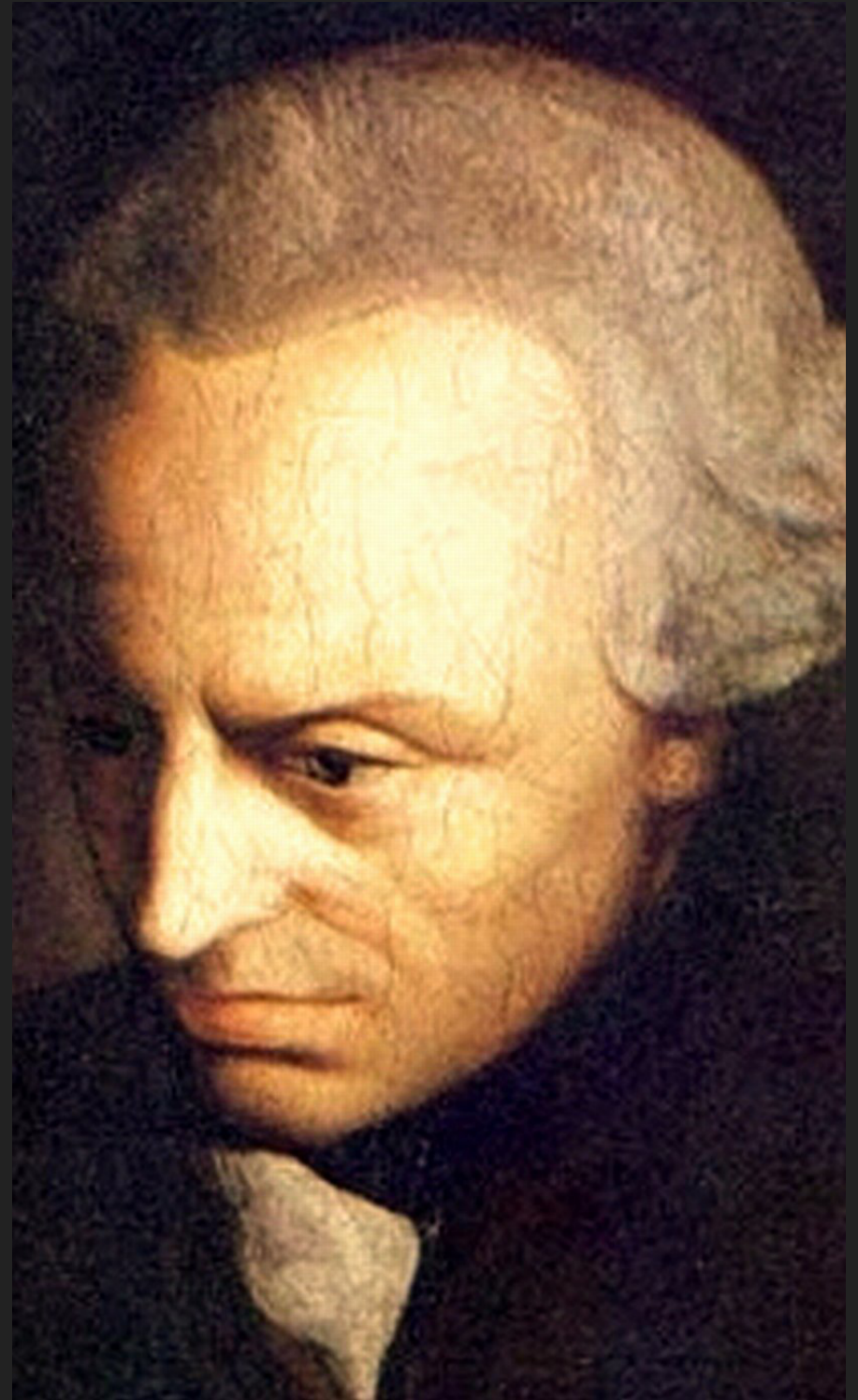
To secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

...whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

IMMANUEL KANT

1724-1804

- ▶ We don't agree about what is *beautiful* – but we believe that we should agree, and try to convince others
- ▶ Kant suggests that our sensitivity to the beautiful indicates something universal in us that transcends us; we don't agree about the beautiful, and yet everyone believes that every rational mind *should* agree with him or her
- ▶ Sounds great: universal human rights granted on the basis of a shared universal human rationality
- ▶ Unless I say you're not rational. Like children. And women. And non-Europeans. And animals. And the world.





JONATHAN SWIFT

1667-1745

- ▶ Pioneered the “reverse Mohawk”
- ▶ Like *Candide*, travel narrative as *satire* – but crucially does not explore the real world, but a world of fantasy
- ▶ Gulliver is initially motivated by two impulses: money and knowledge (the Age of Exploration is scientific *and* capitalist enterprise); he appears like an early anthropologist, in fact



My hours of leisure I spent in reading the best authors, ancient and modern, being always provided with a good number of books; and, when I was ashore, in observing the manners and dispositions of the people, as well as learning their language, wherein I had a great facility, by the strength of my memory.

JONATHAN SWIFT 1667-1745

- ▶ The social world of Europe comes under a microscope, but a kind of reverse microscope
- ▶ the ridiculous customs of the Lilliputians are rendered harmless through their tiny size, which in turn allows us to recognize our own customs without taking offense
- ▶ See, for example, the arbitrary nature of finding favor (and appointment) at court (and the implicit critique that a more rational system might be better)

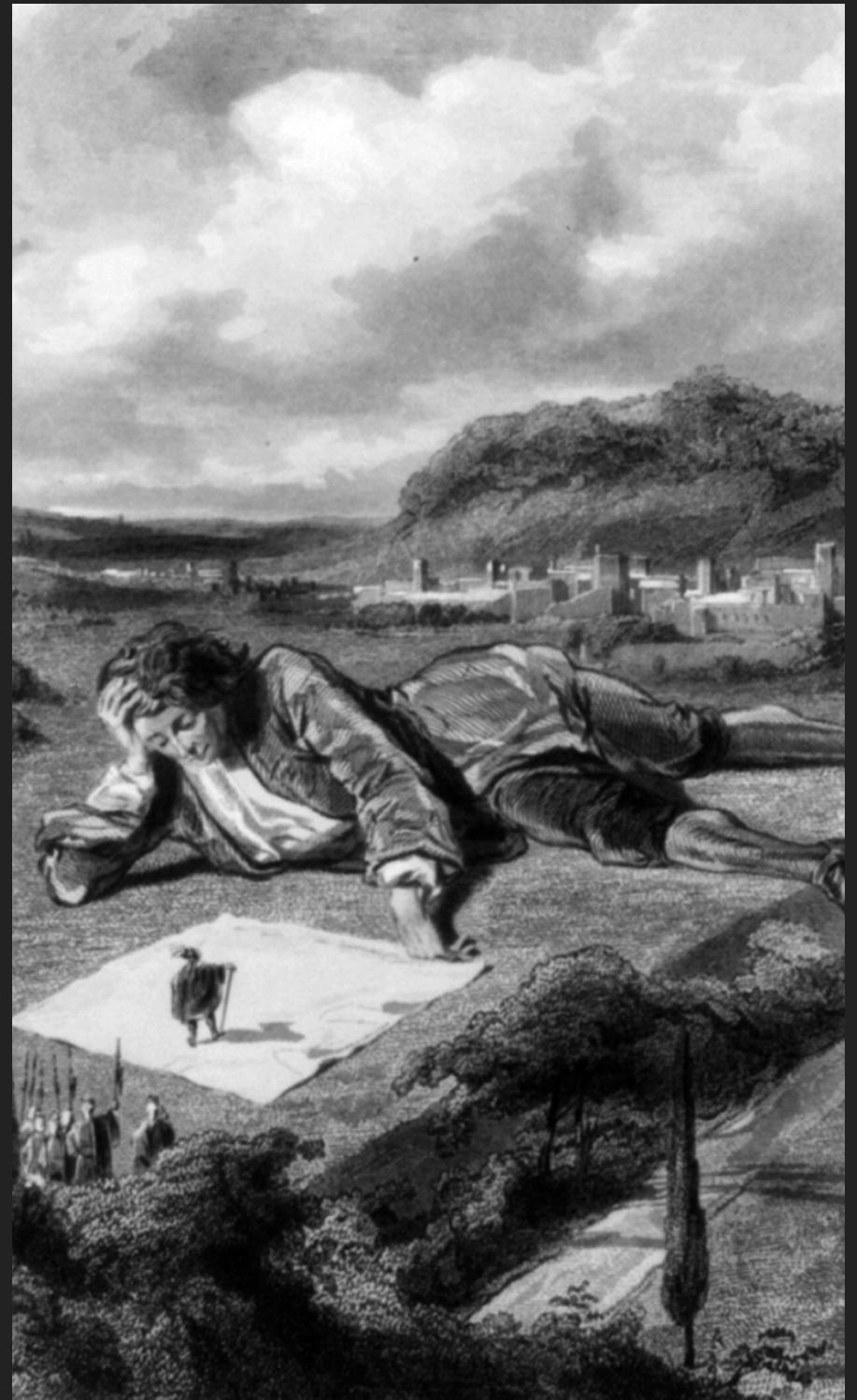


Rope-dancing is only practised by those persons who are candidates for great employments and high favor at court. They are trained in this art from their youth, and are not always of noble birth or liberal education. When a great office is vacant, either by death or disgrace (which often happens) five or six of those candidates petition the emperor to entertain his majesty, and the court, with a dance on the rope, and whoever jumps the highest, without falling, succeeds in the office. Very often the chief ministers themselves are commanded to show their skill, and to convince the emperor that they have not lost their faculty. Flimnap, the treasurer, is allowed to cut a caper on the straight rope, at least an inch higher than any lord in the whole empire.

Golbasto Momaren Evlame Gurdilo Shefin
Mully Ully Gue, Most Mighty Emperor of
Lilliput, delight and terror of the universe,
whose dominions extend five thousand
blustrugs [about twelve miles in
circumference] to the extremities of the globe;
monarch of all monarchs, taller than the sons
of men; whose feet press down to the centre,
and whose head strikes against the sun; at
whose nod the princes of the earth shake their
knees, etc., etc.

JONATHAN SWIFT 1667-1745

- ▶ At times, the critique of his own society is very direct, but typically when the target is defenseless (“their manner of writing is very peculiar, being neither from the left to the right like the Europeans; nor from the right to the left, like the Arabians; nor from up to down, like the Chinese, but aslant, from one corner of the paper to the other, like ladies in England.”)
- ▶ Swift also describes “very peculiar” customs of the Lilliputians that he in fact believes are good, implicitly critiquing Europe: false informants to be put to death; fraud as worse than theft; not only punishing law-breakers, but rewarding law-abiders



JONATHAN SWIFT

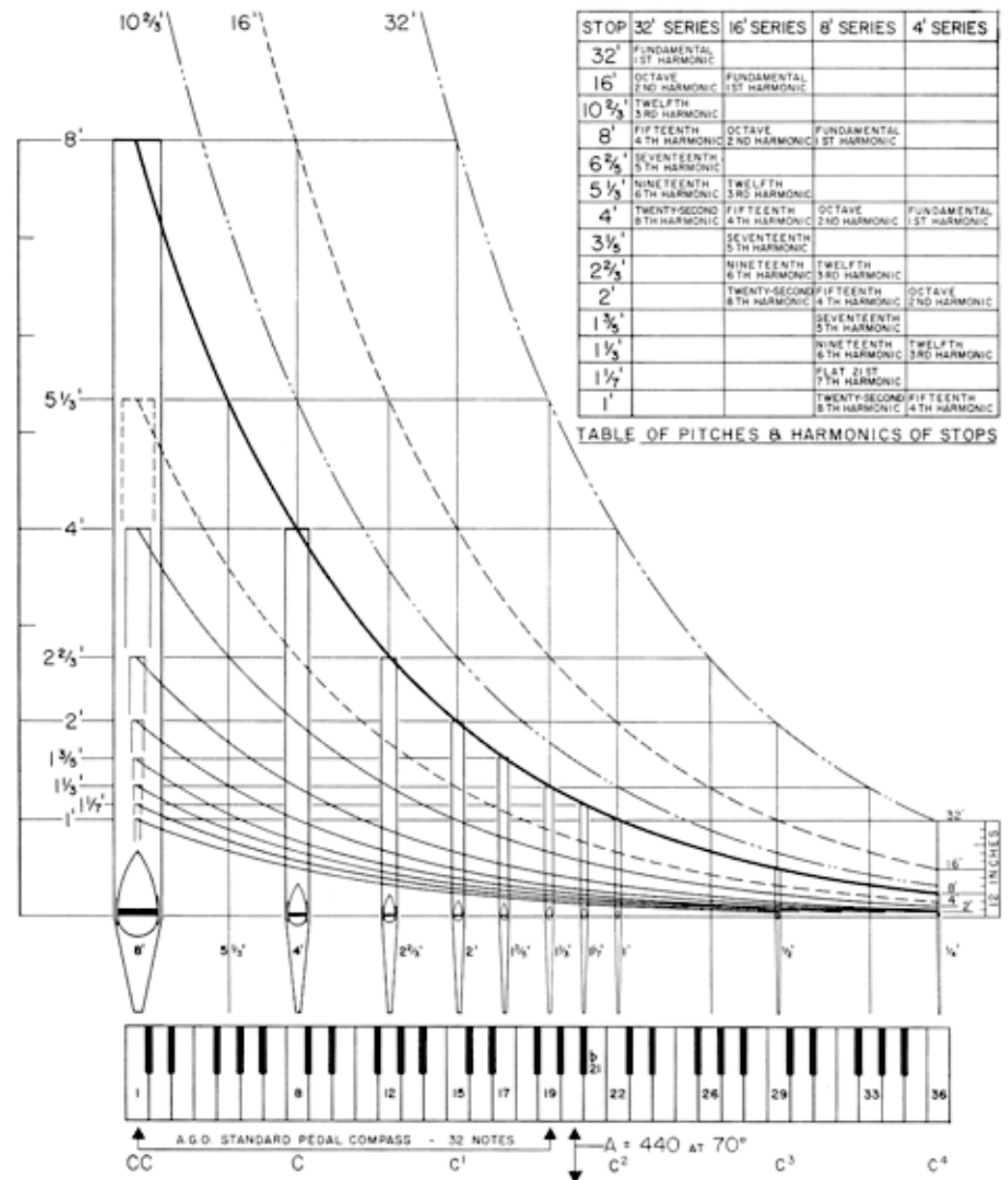
1667-1745

- ▶ Gulliver has three more travels after this, which he uses to ridicule other institutions and customs (science in the pursuit of pure knowledge, such as “extracting sunbeams from cucumbers”)
- ▶ His final voyage is perhaps the most telling, where he encounters two races: hideous, violent humans called Yahoos, and the utopian Houyhnhnms, a race of intelligent horses, orderly, totally rational, peaceful – but also pitiless, perhaps a critique of utopianism
- ▶ Gulliver finds it unbearable to return to Europe and live among the Yahoos; like *Candide*, Swift was sure of his criticism, less sure how to move forward









Denis Diderot
Encyclopédie | Music | Repression

1713-1784