The Enlightenment Confronts the Divine: the Debate over the Lisbon Earthquake

Honors World Studies

Examining the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the debate about it allows us to learn a great deal about the Enlightenment. Use the questions before each of the following 9 documents to guide you as you work to answer these basic questions: Why did the Lisbon earthquake present such an intellectual crisis for eighteenth-century thinkers? How did theologians explain the disaster within the framework of their beliefs? How did Enlightenment thinkers explain it? In what direction was their thought on the physical world and its relationship to divine forces leading them?

THE PROBLEM:

Because Roman Catholics observe November 1 as All Saints' Day, a holy day obliging their attendance at the mass in commemoration of all the church's saints, most of the population of Lisbon, Portugal was either at church or preparing to attend services on the sunny morning of Saturday, November 1, 1755. At 9:30 A.M., however, a loud rumbling noise disrupted the peaceful morning. Then three great seismic shocks rocked the city and ended its citizens' religious devotions. Churches and homes alike tumbled during this earthquake whose shocks were felt as far away as Switzerland and northern France, and many persons perished. Other disasters resulting from the earthquake soon increased the loss of life. Fires spread from the hearths of the damaged city and burned for almost a week before they could be extinguished. The trembling of the earth created ocean waves 15 to 20 feet high that swept up the Tagus River on which Lisbon is situated and broke over the city's waterfront. The combined destruction of earthquake, fires, and tidal waves left about 10,000 to 15,000 dead on that holy day of November 1.

Natural disasters such as this always have perplexed the human mind. What is the reason for them? Why do they happen where they do? For religious persons of the Judeo-Christian West in the eighteenth century, what was the explanation for such evils as earthquakes in a world they believed was governed by a benevolent God? The Lisbon earthquake was a remarkable catalyst to thought and debate in its time, prompting contemporary thinkers to propose a variety of answers to these eternal questions.

Certainly the Lisbon earthquake was not the most destructive in human history; far more devastating quakes have occurred. What made this disaster worthy of note was its location and its timing. Because the 1755 earthquake struck a major capital and international trading center, it captured the attention of all informed Europeans. These educated Europeans recorded their reactions to the disaster in a period of intellectual change, and their writings relevant to the earthquake and the broader issue of humankind's understanding of the physical world provide us a unique look into the evolution of Western thought.

By the year 1755, Europe approached the culmination of an intellectual revolution underway since the sixteenth century. Scientific discoveries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which your textbook describes as the Scientific Revolution, produced a wholly new outlook on the physical world that gained increasing acceptance among educated Europeans. The result of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century work of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and others was a growing certainty that the physical world could be understood through the ability of human reason to discern immutable mathematical laws that governed it. No longer did intellectuals explain the world in terms of supernatural action. The physical world increasingly appeared to be a great machine, and many eighteenth-century thinkers, called Deists in their religious outlook, posited a novel relationship between God and the physical world. The movements of the world-machine might have been created by God, but Deists believed that they could not be interrupted by Him. Some thinkers also had faith that a divine plan governed the world, affirming that all would be well. But all agreed that nothing happened in such a world without sufficient cause or reason. This was a true revolution in thought, espoused by intellectuals called philosophes, who sought to apply their faith in the existence of reasonable and comprehensible natural laws to all aspects of the human experience.

The Enlightenment's concept of a machinelike universe contradicted much in the traditional Judeo-Christian concept of God. Most important, perhaps, Enlightenment thought precluded any belief in divine intervention in the physical world. Miracles, for example, simply were impossible for the philosophes because they violated natural laws of cause and effect. Traditional religious beliefs, however, were not without their defenders. Often these defenders were clergymen who, using the same tools of reason employed by the Enlightenment's exponents, strongly disagreed with the philosophes. In Catholic Europe, members of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, were important defenders of traditional beliefs; in France they even published an influential monthly journal for their cause, the Journal de Trevoux.

Clergymen in Protestant countries also espoused traditional beliefs concerning a divine presence in the world.

Debate between the proponents of these two differing visions of this world's relationship to God had been underway for years before the Lisbon earthquake. That disaster elicited from theologians very predictable explanations, as we will see. The philosophes, however, differed markedly among themselves on the earthquake's significance. By reading selections on the exchange of ideas occasioned by the Lisbon earthquake, the background on how some of these ideas developed, and the later implications of these thoughts, you will gain a deeper understanding of eighteenth-century thought about God and His relationship to the world. This was a key issue for the age, and one widely debated.

1. Estimates on the earthquake toll vary greatly, ranging as high as 60,000 persons. T. D. Kendrick, the author of a modern study, The Lisbon Earthquake (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1957), accepts 10,000-15,000 as the probable number of dead, and, indeed, as the city's population was only about 275,000, the figure of 60,000 dead is difficult to accept.
2. A number of twentieth-century earthquakes, for which we have more accurate casualty counts, have clearly been more devastating. For example, the quake that struck Yokohama, Japan on September 1, 1923 took about 200,000 lives; another in Tangshan, China on July 28, 1976 killed about 242,000 persons.
3. Other earthquakes of the period either struck on the fringes of the West, as in Jamaica in 1692 and Peru in 1746, or in isolated parts of Europe, as in Sicily in 1693. The few that had occurred in major cities—like London's quakes of 1750—had been slight in comparison to Lisbon's.
Consider first the traditional views expressed by Catholic and Protestant theologians.


What caused the Lisbon earthquake, according to Malagrida? Did he foresee further disaster overtaking the city? Can you find in his pamphlet possible remedies for the city's misery from which Lisbon residents might have derived comfort?

Learn, O Lisbon, that the destroyers of our houses, palaces, churches, and convents, the cause of the death of so many people and of the flames that devoured such vast treasures, are your abominable sins, and not comets, stars, vapours and exhalations, and similar natural phenomena. Tragic Lisbon is now a mound of ruins. Would that it were less difficult to think of some method of restoring the place; but it has been abandoned, and the refugees from the city live in despair. As for the dead, what a great harvest of sinful souls such disasters send to Hell! It is scandalous to pretend the earthquake was just a natural event, for if that be true, there is no need to repent and to try to avert the wrath of God, and not even the Devil himself could invent a false idea more likely to lead us all to irreparable ruin. Holy people had prophesied the earthquake was coming, yet the city continued in its sinful ways without a care for the future. Now, indeed, the case of Lisbon is desperate. It is necessary to devote all our strength and purpose to the task of repentance. Would to God we could see as much determination and fervour for this necessary exercise as are devoted to the erection of huts and new buildings! Does being billeted in the country outside the city areas put us outside the jurisdiction of God? God undoubtedly desires to exercise His love and mercy, but be sure that wherever we are, He is watching us, scourge in hand.

2. John Wesley, "Some Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon," 1755

Contrast Malagrida's view of the plight of Lisbon with that of John Wesley, bearing in mind, of course, the latter's Protestantism. What cause did Wesley ascribe to the earthquake? Did he see any way to avoid such disasters? Despite their obvious differences, do you find any similarity in outlook in Malagrida and Wesley?

Thinking men generally allow that the greater part of modern Christians are not more virtuous than the ancient Heathens; perhaps less so; since public spirit, love of our country, generous honesty, and simple truth, are scarce anywhere to be found. On the contrary, covetousness, ambition, various injustice, luxury, and falsehood in every kind, have infected every rank and denomination of people, the Clergy themselves not excepted. Now, who they believe there is a God are apt to believe he is not well pleased with this. Nay, they think, he has intimated it very plainly, in many parts of the Christian world. How long has their blood been crying from the earth! Yea, how long has that bloody night, while none regarded or laid it to heart.

And what shall we say of the late accounts from Portugal? That some thousand houses, and many thousand persons, are no more! that a fair city is now in ruinous heaps! Is there indeed a God that judges the world? And is he now making inquisition for blood? If so, it is not surprising, he should begin there, where so much blood has been poured on the ground like water! where so many brave men have been murdered, in the most base and cowardly as well as barbarous manner, almost every night, as well as every night, while none regarded or laid it to heart. "Let them hunt and destroy the precious life, so we may secure our stores of gold and precious stones." How long has their blood been crying from the earth! Yea, how long has that bloody House of Mercy" the scandal not only of all religion, but even of human nature, stood to insult both heaven and earth! "And shall I not visit for these things, saith the Lord? Shall not my soul be avenged on such a city as this?" . . .

But alas! Why should we not be convinced sooner, while that conviction may avail, that it is not chance which governs the world? Why should we not, before London is as Lisbon, Lima, or Catanea, acknowledge the hand of the Almighty, arising to maintain his own cause? Why, we have a general answer always ready, to screen us from any such conviction: "All these things are purely natural and accidental; the result of natural causes." But there are two objections to this answer: First, it is untrue: Secondly, it is uncomfortable.

First. If by affirming, "All this is purely natural," you mean, it is not providential, or that God has nothing to do with it, this is not true, that is, supposing the Bible to be true. For supposing this, you may descant ever so long on the natural causes of murrain, winds, thunder, lightning, and yet you are altogether wide of the mark, you prove nothing at all, unless you can prove that God never works in or by natural causes. But this you cannot prove; nay, none can doubt of his so working, who allows the Scripture to be of God. For this asserts, in the clearest and strongest terms, that "all things" (in nature) "serve him," that (by or without a train of natural causes) He "sendeth his rain on the earth," that He "bringeth the winds out of his treasures," and "maketh a way for the lightning and the thunder;" in general, that "fire and hail, snow and vapour, wind and storm, fulfil his word." Therefore, allowing there are natural causes of all these, they are still under the direction of the Lord of nature: Nay, what is nature itself, but the art of God, or God's method of acting in the material world?
A Second objection to your answer is, It is extremely uncomfortable. For if things really be as you affirm; if all these afflicting incidents entirely depend on the fortuitous concourse and agency of blind, material causes; what hope, what help, what resource is left for the poor sufferers by them?

What defence do you find from thousands of gold and silver? You cannot fly; for you cannot quit the earth, unless you will leave your dear body behind you. And while you are on the earth, you know not where to flee to, neither where to flee from. You may buy intelligence, where the shock was yesterday, but not where it will be to-morrow,—to-day. It comes! The roof trembles! The beams crack! The ground rocks to and fro! Hoarse thunder resounds from the bowels of the earth! And all these are but the beginning of sorrows. Now, what help? What wisdom can prevent, what strength resist, the blow? What money can purchase, I will not say deliverance, but an hour's reprieve? Poor honourable fool, where are now thy titles? Wealthy fool, where is now thy golden god? If anything can help, it must be prayer. But what wilt thou pray to? Not to the God of heaven; you suppose him to have nothing to do with earthquakes. . . .

But how shall we secure the favour of this great God? How, but by worshipping him in spirit and in truth; by uniformly imitating Him we worship, in all his imitable perfections? without which the most accurate systems of opinions, all external modes of religion, are idle cobwebs of the brain, dull farce and empty show. Now, God is love: Love God then, and you are a true worshipper. Love mankind, and God is your God, your Father, and your Friend. But see that you deceive not your own soul; for this is not a point of small importance. And by this you may know: If you love God, then you are happy in God; if you love God, riches, honours, and the pleasures of sense are no more to you than bubbles on the water: You look on dress and equipage, as the tassels of a fool's cap; diversions, as the bells on a fool's coat. If you love God, God is in all your thoughts, and your whole life is a sacrifice to him. And if you love mankind, it is your own design, desire, and endeavour, to spread virtue and happiness all around you; to lessen the present sorrows, and increase the joys, of every child of man; and, if it be possible, to bring them with you to the rivers of pleasure that are at God's right hand for evermore.

6. Intense warfare did mark the half-century preceding the earthquake. The great Northern War (1700-1716) pitted Sweden against Russia. In the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), France and Spain fought against England, Holland, the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor, and most of the German states. In the War of the Polish Succession (1733-1735), Spain and France confronted Russia and the forces of the Holy Roman Emperor. Almost all of Europe was involved in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) in which France, Spain, Prussia, and a number of the German states fought England and Austria. At the time Wesley wrote, fighting between English and French forces had already broken out in North America that would lead to the Seven Years War of 1756-1763. And these were only the major wars! Minor conflicts also raged. One historian reckoned that all of Europe was at peace for only two years in the century spanning 1700-1800.

7. Wesley refers here to the earthquakes of 1692, 1693, and 1746 mentioned in note 3.

8. In the Bible's book of Genesis, chapters 11-14 and 19, God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire because of their wickedness. Abraham's nephew, Lot, a resident of Sodom, was warned of the destruction and escaped.

9. In this sentence Wesley is referring to the executions resulting from trials by the Portuguese Inquisition. The Inquisition was a system of Roman Catholic courts created to identify and judge heretics. Like all continental European courts of the day, these courts could torture the defendant to gather evidence against him or her. Civil, not church, authorities, however, executed sentences.

10. Precious stones: "Merchants who have lived in Portugal inform us that the King has a large building filled with diamonds; and more gold stored up, coined and uncoined, than all the other monarchs of Europe." [Wesley's note] This may or may not have been true, but Lisbon certainly received gold from New World mines and diamonds from mines discovered in the Portuguese colony of Brazil in the 1730s.

11. House of Mercy: "The title which the Inquisition of Portugal (if not in other countries also) takes to itself." [Wesley's note]

Now move on to Enlightenment sources, which are arranged to permit you to trace the development of the philosophers' responses to the disaster and the implications of their thought.

3. Voltaire on Newtonian Physics, 1733


Voltaire's distillation of Newton's physics in Source 3 is fundamental to understanding the Enlightenment because Newton's work provided the basis for the philosophers' understanding of the world in which they lived. Through what method did Newton propose to understand the physical world? What relationships did he find governing the physical world? In what way did Newton's ideas provide a governing theory to explain much of that physical world? Why might you expect those influenced by Newton to describe the physical world as a machine?

Not long since, the trite and frivolous Question following was debated in a very polite and learned Company, viz. (namely) who was the greatest Man, Caesar, Alexander, Tamerlane, Cromwell, etc.  

Some Body answ'er'd, that Sir Isaac Newton excell'd them all. The Gentleman's Assertion was very just; for if true Greatness consists in having receiv'd from Heaven a mighty Genius, and in having employ'd it to enlighten our own Minds and that of others; a Man like Sir Isaac Newton, whose equal is hardly found in a thousand Years, is the truly great Man. And those Politicians and Conquerors, (and all ages produce some) were generally so many illustrious wicked Men. That Man claims our Respect, who commands over the Minds of the rest of the World by the Force of Truth, not those who enslave their Fellow Creatures; He who is acquainted with the Universe, not They who deface it. 

The Discoveries which gain'd Sir Isaac Newton so universal a Reputation, relate to the System of the World, to Light, to Geometrical Infinities; and lastly to Chronology, with which he us'd to amuse himself after the Fatigue of his severer Studies. 

I will now acquaint you (without Prolixity if possible) with the few Things I have been able to comprehend of all these sublime Ideas. With Regard to the System of our World, Disputes were a long Time maintain'd, on the Cause that turns the Planets, and keeps them in their Orbits; and on those Causes which make all Bodies here below descend towards the Surface of the Earth. 

Having . . . destroy'd the Cartesian Vortices, 13 he despa'ir'd of ever being able to discover, whether there is a secret Principle in Nature which, at the same Time, is the Cause of the Motion of all celestial Bodies, and that of Gravity on the Earth. But being retir'd in 1666, upon Account of the Plague, to a Solitude near Cambridge; as he was walking one Day in his Garden, and saw some Fruits
fall from a Tree, he fell into a profound Meditation on that Gravity, the Cause of which had so long been sought, but in vain, by all the Philosophers, whilst the Vulgar think there is nothing mysterious in it. He said to himself, that from what height soever, in our Hemisphere, those Bodies might descend, their Fall would certainly be in the Progression discover'd by Galileo; "and the Spaces they run thro' would be as the Square of the Times. Why may not this Power which causes heavy Bodies to descend, and is the same without any sensible Diminution at the remotest Distance from the Center of the Earth, or on the Summits of the highest Mountains; Why, said Sir Isaac, may not this Power extend as high as the Moon? And in Case, its Influence reaches so far, is it not very probable that this Power retains it in its Orbit, and determines its Motion? But in case the Moon obeys this Principle (whatever it be) may we not conclude very naturally, that the rest of the Planets are equally subject to it?

…This is Attraction, the great Spring by which all Nature is mov'd. Sir Isaac Newton after having demonstrated the Existence of this Principle, plainly foresaw that its very Name would offend; and therefore this Philosopher in more Places than one of his Books, gives the Reader some Caution about it. He bids him beware of confounding this Name with what the Ancients call'd occult Qualities; but to be satisfied with knowing that there is in all Bodies a central Force which acts to the utmost Limits of the Universe, according to the invariable Laws of Mechanics.

12. Julius Caesar (102-44 B.C.) dominated Rome during the last years of the republic. Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) was the king of Macedonia who led the Greeks on wars of conquest to create an empire including modern Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and much of the Middle East to the borders of India. Tamerlane (ca 1336-1405) was a Mongol chieftain who created an empire embracing parts of southern Russia, Turkey, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1668) led Parliament's armies against the king in the English Civil War. After the king's defeat and execution, he ruled England as virtual dictator.

13. Cartesian vortices: Rene Descartes (1546-1650), a French philosopher and mathematician, accounted for planetary motion in terms of vortices, that is, a rapid movement of cosmic bodies in a fluid or ether around an axis. Newtonian physics with its law of gravity dispensed with such theories.

14. Galileo Galilei: Italian astronomer, mathematician, and physicist (1564-1642) whose work was an important contribution to the Scientific Revolution. He developed the mathematical explanation of the rates at which bodies fall to earth in his law of falling bodies.

4. From the Encyclopedia, Anonymous Entry on "Observation," ca 1765

What view of reason does this article offer to its readers?

OBSERVATION (Gram. Physic. Med.) is the attention of the soul focused on objects offered by nature. An experiment is the result of this same attention directed toward phenomena produced by the labors of man. We must, therefore, include within the meaning of the generic noun observation the examination of all natural effects, not only of those that present themselves at once and without intermediary to our sight but also those we would not be able to discover without the hand of a worker, provided that this hand has not changed, altered, or disfigured them. The work necessary to reach a mine does not prevent the examination that is made of the metal's distribution, position, quantity, and color from being a simple observation. It is also by observation that we know the interior geography, that we estimate the number, position, and nature of the layers of earth, although we are obliged to resort to instruments for the excavation that allows us to see the mine. We must not consider as an experiment the opening of cadavers, the dissection of plants or animals, and certain analyses or mechanical sorting of mineral matter that scientists are obliged to do in order to be able to observe the parts that enter into their composition. The telescope of astronomers, the magnifying glass of the naturalist, and the microscope of the physicist do not prevent the knowledge acquired by these means from being the exact product of observation. All these preparations, these instruments only serve to render the different objects of observation more concrete, to remove the obstacles that prevent us from perceiving them, or to pierce the veil that hides them. But no change results from this, and there is not the slightest alteration in the nature of the observed object. It appears, nevertheless, such as it is; and this is the main difference between an observation and an experiment which decomposes, combines, and thereby gives use to rather different phenomena from those which nature presents.

Observation is the primary foundation of all the sciences, the most reliable way to arrive at one's goal, the principal means of extending the periphery of scientific knowledge and of illuminating all its points. The facts, whatever they are, constitute the true wealth of the philosopher and the subject of observation: the historian collects them, the theoretical physicist combines them, and the experimenter verifies the results of their synthesis. Several facts taken separately appear dry, sterile, and unfruitful. The moment we compare them, they acquire a certain power, assume a vitality that everywhere results from the mutual harmony, from the reciprocal support, and from a chain that binds them together. The connection of these facts and the general cause that links them together are some of the objects of reasoning, theories, and systems, while the facts are the materials. The moment a certain number of them have been gathered, some people hasten to construct; and the building is the more solid as the materials are more numerous and each one of them finds a more appropriate place.

5. From Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, Natural History, General and Specific, ca 1750

How does Buffon attempt to apply this vision in his selection on earthquakes? What sort of causal pattern does he find for earthquakes? Despite his explanation of earthquakes, which is recognized today as incorrect, is there any room for a divine role in Buffon's explanation of these disasters? With whose view do you more closely identify, that of Buffon or Malagrida?

There are two kinds of earthquakes. One type is caused by the action of subterranean fires and by the explosion of volcanoes and is only felt over small distances when volcanoes are active or when they erupt. When the materials which make subterranean fires begin to ferment, to heat up, and to ignite, the fire expands on all sides and, if it does not naturally find outlets, it heaves up the ground
and makes a passage by throwing out the earth in its way. This produces a volcano, the effects of which repeat themselves and endure in proportion to the inflammable materials.

But there is another kind of earthquake, very different as regards its effects and perhaps as regards its causes. These are the earthquakes which are felt over long distances and which shake a large area of terrain without the appearance of a new volcano or an eruption. We have examples of earthquakes which are felt at the same time in England, France, Germany, and as far away as Hungary. These earthquakes always extend over an area much longer than it is wide. They shake a band or zone of the earth with varying force in different locations. They are almost always accompanied by a muffled sound, similar to that of a large, quickly rolling coach.

To understand more fully the causes of this kind of earthquake, it is necessary to remember that all inflammable and explosive materials produce...a great deal of air in igniting.16 This air produced by the fire is in a very highly rarefied state and, because of its state of compression in the depths of the earth, it must produce very violent effects. Let us therefore suppose that at a very great depth, say 600 to 1200 feet, there are found pyrites and other sulphurous materials and that by the fermentation produced by the filtration of water or by other causes, these materials ignite. Let us see what must happen. These materials are not regularly arranged in horizontal strata...they are, on the contrary, in perpendicular clefts in the caverns...where water can penetrate and have an effect. These materials ignite, producing a large quantity of air, the force of which, compressed in a small space like a cavern, not only will shake the terrain above but will look for routes of escape...The routes which are available are caverns and cuts by water and subterranean streams. The rarefied air will rush violently through all of these passages which are open to it. It will form a raging wind in its subterranean paths, the noise of which will be heard on the earth's surface, and it will be accompanied by shock and concussions. This subterranean wind produced by the fire will extend as far as the subterranean cavities and cuts, and will cause a tremor the violence of which will depend on the distance from the source and the narrowness of the passages through which the wind passes.... This air will produce no eruption or volcano because it will have found enough space in which to expand or indeed because it will have found escapes and will have left the earth in the form of wind or vapor.17

16. Buffon advanced this description of combustion a quarter of a century before the great French chemist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794) accurately described combustion and the role of oxygen in this process.
17. The article on "Earthquakes" in the Encyclopedia edited by Diderot also explains this phenomenon with a theory of subterranean fire. Modern geologists have shown earthquakes to be the result of stresses in the earth's crust. Interestingly, however, modern research also has shown that the eighteenth-century theories of subterranean fire were not entirely incorrect: the earth does have a liquid core of practically molten rock.

7. From Voltaire, "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster, or An Examination of that Axiom 'All Is Well','" 1755

Voltaire's "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" is the reaction of the Enlightenment's most celebrated thinker to the earthquake. Contrast it with the account he had written earlier of Newton's science. How had Voltaire's point of view changed during this interval? How does Voltaire respond to the views of his friend Alexander Pope? What response does he have to the theological explanation of the quake? Do you detect a growing skepticism in the thought of the older Voltaire? If so, in what ways?

Oh, miserable mortals! Oh wretched earth!
Oh, dreadful assembly of all mankind!
Eternal sermon of useless sufferings!
Deluded philosophers who cry, "All is well,"
Hasten, contemplate these frightful ruins,
This wreck, these shreds, these wretched ashes of the dead;
These women and children heaped on one another,
These scattered members under broken marble;
One-hundred thousand unfortunates devoured by the earth,18
Who, bleeding, lacerated, and still alive,
Buried under their roofs without aid in their anguish,
End their sad days!
In answer to the half-formed cries of their dying voices,
At the frightful sight of their smoking ashes,
Will you say: "This is result of eternal laws
Directing the acts of a free and good God!"
Will you say, in seeing this mass of victims:
"God is revenged, their death is the price for their crimes?"
What crime, what error did these children,
Crushed and bloody on their mothers' breasts, commit?
Did Lisbon, which is no more, have more vices
Than London and Paris immersed in their pleasures?
Lisbon is destroyed, and they dance in Paris!
18. Voltaire wrote this poem on hearing the first news of the disaster. Those first reports grossly exaggerated the number of deaths, as does the poem.
What response to Voltaire does Jean-Jacques Rousseau make in his letter? What similarities in thinking with earlier selections do you find in Rousseau?

All my complaints are... against your poem on the Lisbon disaster, because I expected from it evidence more worthy of the humanity which apparently inspired you to write it. You reproach Pope19 and Leibnitz20 with belittling our misfortunes by affirming that all is well, but you so burden the list of our miseries that you further disparage our condition. Instead of the consolations that I expected, you only vex me. It might be said that you fail that I don't feel my unhappiness enough, and that you are trying to soothe me by proving that all is bad.

Do not be mistaken, Monsieur, it happens that everything is contrary to what you propose. This optimism which you find so cruel consoles me still in the same woes that you force on me as unbearable. Pope's poem21 alleviates my difficulties and inclines me to patience; yours makes my afflictions worse, prompts me to grumble, and, leading me beyond a shattered hope, reduces me to despair.

"Have patience, man," Pope and Leibnitz tell me, "your woes are a necessary effect of your nature and of the constitution of the universe. The eternal and beneficient Being who governs the universe wished to protect you. Of all the possible plans, he chose that combining the minimum evil and the maximum good. If it is necessary to say the same thing more bluntly, God has done no better for mankind because (He) can do no better."

Now what does your poem tell me? "Suffer forever unfortunate one. If a God created you, He is doubtlessly all powerful and could have prevented all your woes. Don't ever hope that your woes will end, because you would never know why you exist, if it is not to suffer and die...

I do not see how one can search for the source of moral evil anywhere but in man... Moreover... the majority of our physical misfortunes are also our work. Without leaving your Lisbon subject, concede, for example, that it was hardly nature that there brought together twenty-thousand houses of six or seven stories. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all. Everyone would have fled at the first shock. But many obstinately remained... to expose themselves to additional earth tremors because what they would have had to leave behind was worth more than what they could carry away. Tow many unfortunates perished in this disaster through the desire to fetch their clothing, papers, or money.

There are often events that afflict us... that lose a lot of their horror when we examine them closely. I learned in Zadig,22 and nature daily confirms my lesson, that a rapid death is not always a true misfortune, and that it can sometimes be considered a relative blessing. Of the many persons crushed under Lisbon's ruins, some without doubt escaped greater misfortunes, and... it is not certain that a single one of these unfortunates suffered more than if, in the normal course of events, he had awaited [a more normal] death to overtake him after long agonies. Was death [in the ruins] a sufferer, and than that of a dying person overburdened with useless treatments, whose notary,23 and heirs do not allow him a respite, whom the doctors kill in his own bed at their leisure, and whom the barbarous priests artfully try to make relish death? For me, I see everywhere that the misfortunes nature imposes upon us are less cruel than those which we add to them...

I cannot prevent myself, Monsieur, from noting... a strange contrast between you and me as regards the subject of this letter. Satiated with glory... you live free in the midst of affluence.24 Certain of your immortality, you peacefully philosophize on the nature of the soul, and, if your body or heart suffer, you have Tronchin25 as doctor and friend. You however find only evil on earth. And I, an obscure and poor man tormented with an incurable illness, meditate with pleasure in my seclusion and find that all is well. What is the source of this apparent contradiction? You explained it yourself: you revel but I hope, and hope beautifies everything.

19. Alexander Pope, whose "Essay on Man" is Source 4 in this chapter.
20. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz: a German mathematician and philosopher (1646-1716), the author of Essays on Theodicy, in which he examined the origins of evil in the world. Leibnitz saw the universe operating according to a divine plan and therefore this was the best of all possible worlds. He was not a total optimist, however, because he recognized the existence of evil. Incompletely understanding the thought of Leibnitz, Voltaire satirized him as a blind optimist in his novel Candide (1759).
22. Zadig: a story published by Voltaire in 1747 that still reflected some faith on his part that a divine order for the world assured that all would work out for the best. In the story, Zadig, the main character, endures a lengthy series of misfortunes.
23. notary: in France and other Continental countries, a professional person specializing in drafting wills and inventorying the property involved in them as well as drawing up other property arrangements.
24. Voltaire had prospered from his publishings and also had invested well. He owned property in Geneva, Switzerland and a large estate at Ferney, France, on the Swiss border.
25. Theodore Tronchin: a physician (1709-1781) of Geneva, Switzerland. A pioneer in smallpox inoculation in Switzerland, he was a member of Voltaire's circle.


Where have the principles of the Enlightenment led in Holbach's "System of Nature?" As we noted earlier, some of Halbach's contemporaries called him an atheist. How else might you describe his thought?

Those who admit a cause exterior to matter, are obliged to suppose, that this cause produced all the motion by which matter is agitated in giving it existence. This supposition rests on another, namely, that matter could begin to exist; a hypothesis that, until
this moment, has never been demonstrated by anything like solid proof. To produce from nothing, or the Creation, is a term that
cannot give us the most slender idea of the formation of the universe; it presents no sense, upon which the mind can fasten itself.

Motion becomes still more obscure, when creation, or the formation of matter, is attributed to a spiritual being, that is to say,
to a being which has no analogy, no point of contact, with it; to a being which has neither extent, nor parts, and cannot, therefore, be
susceptible of motion, as we understand the term; this being only the change of one body relatively to another body, in which the
body moved, presents successively different parts to different points of space. Moreover, as all the world are nearly agreed that matter
can never be totally annihilated, or cease to exist, how can we understand, that that which cannot cease to be, could ever have had a
beginning?

EPILOGUE:

The difference in outlook between Malagrida and Wesley on one hand and the older and skeptical Voltaire and the Baron
d'Holbach on the other is immense, and it represents a long intellectual journey for eighteenth-century thinkers. The culmi-
nation of this journey represented the success of the Scientific Revolution in modeling for the Western mind a method of
searching for reasonable, scientific explanations of natural phenomena as well as imparting its faith in human ability to find these
answers.

The Enlightenment, however, meant much more than even this. The implications of a movement ultimately unprepared, as we
have seen, to accept traditional religion were tremendous beyond the fields of theology and natural science. Enlightenment skepticism
in matters religious is controversial even to the present day. Its search for reasonable and comprehensible natural laws to govern all
aspects of the human experience helped to change the Western world. Though a new and grander Lisbon arose out of the old city's
ruins, much else did not long survive the intellectual crisis of mid-century that earthquake embodied. Disappointment greeted the
philosophes' search for rational laws governing humankind's own creations on earth, and they called for changes in those institutions.
Their failure to discover a basis in reason for divine-right rule (see Chapter 1) led many philosophes to call for the reform of
monarchy. In his Social Contract, for example, Rousseau argued for a new governing principle in which the general will of the people
should govern. In the criminal justice practiced by governments of the day, the philosophes found a brutal system in which courts
might employ torture to force defendants to testify against themselves and in which capital punishment was common. Many
philosophes argued against the barbarism of such a system. In the work of the Italian thinker Cesare Boneasona, Marchese di Beccaria
(1738-1794), the Enlightenment produced a strong statement against the death penalty and in favor of punishments based on prison
terms graduated to fit the offense.

In religious matters, philosophes everywhere found an intolerance that to them seemed irrational, and Voltaire led their call
for toleration and freedom of thought. Not even economic affairs escaped the attention of the philosophes. Eighteenth-
century economic life was still dominated by guilds (see Chapter 5) that set prices and government mercantilist policies that regulated trade.
Adam Smith (1723-1790), a Scottish economist, led many Enlightenment thinkers in calling for a free economy. Let the natural laws
of the economy work unimpeded and unregulated and the needs of all would be met, they argued. Everywhere the philosophes looked,
they saw the need for reform. The existence today in the modern West of much of what they called for testifies to the wide-ranging
influence of their thought.

A further casualty of the earthquake in Portugal was the Society of Jesus, one of the great opponents of much
Enlightenment thought. The disaster enhanced the power of the Marquis of Pombal, chief minister of Portugal's weak-willed monarch,
Joseph I, because he led the relief and rebuilding efforts in the devastated city. The Portuguese version of that eighteenth-century
phenomenon described in your text as the "enlightened despot," Pombal wielded more and more royal power even though he never
wore the crown. Your text recounts the careers of a number of enlightened despots, including Frederick the Great of Prussia and
Joseph II of Austria. Like these rulers, Pombal had a vision of a government that was first of all absolute in power and only
secondarily reforming in its policies. He found the great power of the Catholic Church in Portugal a formidable obstacle to his hopes
of building the secular strength of the state. Armed with greater prestige after the earthquake, Pombal attacked the greatest bastion of
clerical power, the Society of Jesus, and expelled almost all of Portugal's Jesuits on September 1, 1759. In 1761 he ordered the execu-
tion of Malagrida, the Society's most visible Portuguese spokesman. Malagrida's ideas stood in the way of reconstruction
because he preached a need for spiritual regeneration and focused people's attentions on the next life. Pombal, in contrast, required all
of Portugal's energies for rebuilding in the here and now. Other Catholic countries duplicated the Portuguese expulsion of the Jesuits.
Local political or theological issues were often at the root of such expulsions, but they resulted in the worldwide abolition of the
Society of Jesus from 1773 to 1814.

The post-earthquake Western world, thanks to the natural forces of the Lisbon disaster and the intellectual forces of the
Enlightenment, would be considerably transformed on a number of levels. The fruits of Enlightenment thought are still with us in
many forms.

So, why did the Lisbon earthquake present such an intellectual crisis for eighteenth-century thinkers? How did theologians
explain the disaster within the framework of their beliefs? How did Enlightenment thinkers explain it? In what direction was
their thought on the physical world and its relationship to divine forces leading them?