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The Philosophy Of The Enlightenment



The Philosophy
of the Enlightenment

Ernst Cassirer

With a new foreword
by Peter Gay



Synopsis

In this classic work of intellectual history, Ernst Cassirer provides both a cogent synthesis and a penetrating analysis of one of history's greatest intellectual epochs: the Enlightenment. Arguing that there was a common foundation beneath the diverse strands of thought of this period, he shows how Enlightenment philosophers drew upon the ideas of the preceding centuries even while radically transforming them to fit the modern world. In Cassirer's view, the Enlightenment liberated philosophy from the realm of pure thought and restored it to its true place as an active and creative force through which knowledge of the world is achieved. In a new foreword, Peter Gay considers The Philosophy of the Enlightenment in the context in which it was written--Germany in 1932, on the precipice of the Nazi seizure of power and one of the greatest assaults on the ideals of the Enlightenment. He also argues that Cassirer's work remains a trenchant defense against enemies of the Enlightenment in the twenty-first century.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The historian Tim Blanning used the phrase "difficult but profound" to describe this book. Profound because of its insightful treatment of enlightenment intellectual history, difficult because Cassirer employs a fairly technical and unfamiliar vocabulary and the often intricate analysis. This book, however, definitely repays careful reading. Cassirer believed in the Hegelian idea that the study of a period's philosophy allows definition of the distinguishing spirit of that period. Consequently, this is

not a conventional chronological history but a thematic treatment of key areas. Cassirer treats the natural sciences, psychology and epistemology, treatment of religion, attitudes to history, what we would now call political theory and political science, and aesthetics. Each section is distinguished by Cassirer's remarkable erudition. In addition to analysis of major thinkers like Voltaire and Leibnitz, Cassirer discussion of now obscure thinkers to illuminate important issues. Another important feature is Cassirer's careful attention to the German enlightenment, particularly the intellectual tradition initiated by Leibnitz. Several key themes run throughout all sections. One is the importance of reason which Cassirer treats usefully as the use of analysis. Very much inspired by the success of Newtonian physics, analysis is an empirically oriented investigation of natural, psychological, and social worlds, the description of the dynamic processes, and the search for mechanisms. As Cassirer remarks, "the power of reason does not consist in enabling us to transcend the empirical world but rather in teaching us to feel at home in it". The emphasis on reason/analysis is accompanied by a heightened sense of human capacities and the possibility of real human progress.

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