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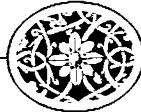
THE AGE OF REASON
1700–1789



IMMANUEL KANT

Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the German philosopher and author who challenged many of the basic assumptions of Western thought and raised fundamental ethical, moral, and epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge, has influenced every serious thinker since his death. The early nineteenth-century German Idealists, including G. F. W. Hegel, the late nineteenth-century Neo-Kantian schools of German thinkers, the twentieth-century American Pragmatists, such as William James and John Dewey, and today's scientists, anthropologists, and historians are all indebted to Kant. Yet, he also engendered diverse and often contentious schools of thought that have set the tone and context of intellectual history for the past two hundred years.

To summarize Kant's fundamental thoughts is extremely difficult. He left a voluminous collection of books, essays, treatises, and scholarly papers that nearly overwhelm all but the most dedicated scholar. He often diverged from his central arguments that challenge the reader in following Kant's basic propositions. His ponderous prose has made it even more demanding to understand his writings.

Yet, some themes come through in his works. For example, humans possess limited reason and, therefore, can understand and comprehend only so much of their physical and metaphysical surroundings. How humans go about their methods of inquiry and what they conclude from these examinations will, in turn, become the foundations of their beliefs. However, such conclusions are always built on the reality of the limitations of human reason. Even though human reason has its limitations, human reason is superior to and must take precedent over passions, blind faith, tradition, or the supernatural. Regardless of reason's limitations, reason also points the way toward a feeling of kinship with others who share this common human trust.

Kant established two distinct categories of what humans can know. What humans can know from experience and from their limited reason is categorized as *phenomena;* what humans cannot know because it lies beyond their experience or reason is known as *noumena.* Noumena includes such metaphysical issues as God, freedom, and immortality, because they cannot be understood by human speculative thought. Therefore, they cannot be either confirmed or denied.

Whereas humans will never achieve their final goals, they must strive and learn to live with reality. Humans, at the same time, must recognize and struggle against evil. Consequently, human achievements will be limited. Yet, some goals—such as self-worth, human dignity, and self-government—are within the realm of possibility.

Kant, who had so much influence, lived a relatively quiet and modest life. He was born in Koenigsberg (now called Kaliningrad, Russia), which was, in the early eighteenth century, an out-of-the-way small port city in East Prussia on the Baltic Sea. His father, a leather worker, had to rear a large family, and prospects for Kant receiving a formal education appeared minimal until his minister encouraged and supported the young man to attend the local university. He first studied Latin literature, but soon became a convert to the natural sciences. After graduation he served as a tutor for several wealthy families, which introduced him to a more cultured and sophisticated way of life. He returned to the university a few years later, and in 1755 he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree. Kant then became a lecturer, which guaranteed him an academic position but no salary. He therefore had to teach the students, who paid him directly, whatever they wanted to learn. He was quickly forced to expand his interest and expertise and to do research in many fields. From his interest in the natural sciences he moved into metaphysics and the study of the foundations of knowledge.

During the 1760s he began to attract attention with his essays on metaphysics and moral philosophy, and in 1770 Kant was named to the position of Professor of Logic at Koenisgberg University, where he would remain for the rest of his life. In 1781 he published his *Critique of Pure Reason*, one of the most influential philosophical works in the history of Western thought, although his book was not so recognized at that time. Nonetheless, the work launched the most productive period of his career; during the next ten years Kant wrote influential studies in history, moral philosophy, and aesthetics.

In the midst of this flurry of writing, in 1784, he drafted his essay, *Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* His essay was in response to a conservative cleric who argued that no further study of political or religious issues was needed since no one had been able to define the term *enlightenment*. Kant's reply is still considered one of the most distinct and concise explanations of the basic concepts of the Enlightenment.

As his reputation grew in the 1780s, he became the center of many controversies. In the early 1790s he ran afoul of the government when the new Prussian monarch, Friedrich Wilhelm III, moved to cut off debate about religion. Edicts were issued to test the religious beliefs of clergymen and professors, and Kant was threatened with warnings not to write on religious topics. The crisis passed after the death of the king in 1797, and Kant resumed his publications on religion. Before his death in 1804, Kant completed his works on ethics, published many of his lectures, and started a book on the sciences and their philosophical implications.

Reading the Selection

Compared to many of his works, *Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* is a model of clarity and exposition. Kant sets out to answer the question from the very beginning and emphatically states his response. Enlightenment is the human's effort to free oneself from the authority of others. Determination and courage to use one's intelligence, without help from others, is enlightenment. *Sapere Aude!*, "Dare to Be Wise!" or—in Kant's translation of the words of the Roman poet, Horace—"Have the courage to use your own intelligence!" is, he asserts without equivocation, the "motto of the enlightenment."

Kant then discusses the power of the "guardians" of society who have taken it upon themselves to make certain that the majority of the populace, including the "the entire 'fair sex,'" not become enlightened. These "guardians" contend that becoming a mature and independent individual is a difficult and dangerous step to take. Dismissing their arguments, Kant declares that enlightenment can be achieved through freedom; in particular, the exercise of freedom for a person to make "public use" of his or her reason. He then explains what he means by the public use of one's reason and provides specific examples as they relate to clergymen and monarchs. Kant returns to his opening statements to answer the question of whether his generation is living in an enlightened age. His answer is *No*; but, he declares, his generation is living in an "age of enlightenment," which, he believes, offers hope for a better future. He does recognize the conflict between individual thought and the power of the state, but Kant concludes his essay on a positive note that government—that is, the Prussian monarchy—is now treating men with dignity.

Enlightenment is man's exit from his self-incurred minority. Minority is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such minority is self-incurred if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another. *Sapere Aude!*[1] Have the courage to use your own intelligence! is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.

Through laziness and cowardice a large part of mankind, even after nature has freed them from alien guidance, gladly remain in minority. It is because of laziness and cowardice that it is so easy for others to usurp the role of guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor! If I have a book which provides meaning for me, a pastor who has conscience for me, a doctor who will judge my diet for me and so on, then I do not need to exert myself. I do not have any need to think; if I can pay, others will take over the tedious job for me. The guardians who have kindly undertaken the supervision will see to it that by far the largest part of mankind, including the entire "fair sex," should consider the step into maturity, not only as difficult but as very dangerous.

After having made their domestic animals dumb and having carefully prevented these quiet creatures from daring to take any step beyond the lead-strings to which they have fastened them, these guardians then show them the danger which threatens them, should they attempt to walk alone. Now this danger is not really so very great; for they would presumably learn to walk after some stumbling. However, an example of this kind intimidates and frightens people out of all further attempts.

It is difficult for the isolated individual to work himself out of the minority which has become almost natural for him. He has even become fond of it and for the time being is incapable of employing his own intelligence, because he has never been allowed to make the attempt. Statutes and formulas, these mechanical tools of a serviceable use, or rather misuse, of his natural faculties, are the ankle-chains of a perpetual minority. Whoever threw it off would make an uncertain jump over the smallest trench because he is not accustomed to such free movement. Therefore there are only a few who have pursued a firm path and have succeeded in escaping from minority by their own cultivation of the mind.

But it is more nearly possible for a public to enlighten itself: this is even inescapable if only the public is given its freedom. For there will always be some people who think for themselves, even among the self-appointed guardians of the great mass who, after having thrown off the yoke of minority themselves, will spread about them the spirit of a reasonable estimate of their own value and of the need for every man to think for himself. It is strange that the very public, which had previously been put under this yoke by the guardians, forces the guardians thereafter to keep it there if it is stirred up by a few of its guardians who are themselves incapable of all enlightenment. It is thus very harmful to plant prejudices, because they come back to plague those very people who themselves (or whose predecessors) have been the originators of these prejudices. Therefore a public can only arrive at enlightenment slowly. Through revolution, the abandonment of personal despotism may be engendered and the end of profit-seeking and domineering oppression may occur, but never a true reform of the state of mind. Instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones, will serve as the guiding reins of the great, unthinking mass.

All that is required for this enlightenment is *freedom;* and particularly the least harmful of all that may be called freedom, namely, the freedom for man to make *public use* of his reason in all matters. But I hear people clamor on all sides: Don't argue! The officer says: Don't argue, drill! The tax collector: Don't argue, pay! The pastor: Don't argue, believe! (Only a single lord in the world says: *Argue,* as much as you want to and about what you please, *but obey!*) Here we have restrictions on freedom everywhere. Which restriction is hampering enlightenment, and which does not, or even promotes it? I answer: The *public use* of a man's reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring enlightenment among men: while the private use of a man's reason may often be restricted rather narrowly without thereby unduly hampering the progress of enlightenment.

I mean by the public use of one's reason, the use which a scholar makes of it before the entire reading public. Private use I call the use which he may make of this reason in a civic post or office. For some affairs which are in the interest of the commonwealth a certain mechanism is necessary through which some members of the commonwealth must remain purely passive in order that an artificial agreement with the government for the public good be maintained or so that at least the destruction of the good be prevented. In such a situation it is not permitted to argue; one must obey. But in so far as this unit of the machine considers himself as a member of the entire commonwealth, in fact even of world society; in other words, he considers himself in the quality of a scholar who is addressing the true public through his writing, he may indeed argue without the affairs suffering for which he is employed partly as a passive member. Thus it would be very harmful if an officer who, given an order by his superior, should start, while in the service, to argue concerning the utility or the appropriateness of that command. He must obey, but he cannot equitably be prevented from making observations as a scholar concerning the mistakes in the military service nor from submitting these to the public for its judgment. The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed upon him. Indeed, a rash criticism of such taxes, if they are the ones to be paid by him, may be punished as a scandal which might cause general resistance. But the same man does not act contrary to the duty

[1] *Sapere Aude!* "Dare to Be Wise!" Kant liberally translated this quote from the first-century B.C. Roman poet and satirist Horace to fit his argument, which read, "Have the courage to use your own intelligence!"

of a citizen if, as a scholar, he utters publicly his thoughts against the undesirability or even the injustice of such taxes. Likewise a clergyman is obliged to teach his pupils and his congregation according to the creed of the church which he serves, for he has been accepted on that condition. But as a scholar, he has full freedom, in fact, even the obligation, to communicate to the public all his diligently examined and well-intentioned thoughts concerning erroneous points in that doctrine and concerning proposals regarding the better institution of religious and ecclesiastical matters. There is nothing in this for which the conscience could be blamed. For what he teaches according to his office as one authorized by the church, he presents as something in regard to which he has no latitude to teach according to his own preference.... He will say: Our church teaches this or that, these are the proofs which are employed for it. In this way he derives all possible practical benefit for his congregation from rules which he would not himself subscribe to with full conviction. But he may nevertheless undertake the presentation of these rules because it is not entirely inconceivable that the truth may be contained in them. In any case, there is nothing directly contrary to inner religion to be found in such doctrines. For, should he believe that the latter was not the case he could not administer his office in good conscience; he would have to resign it. Therefore the use which an employed teacher makes of his reason before his congregation is merely a private use since such a gathering is always only domestic, no matter how large. As a priest (a member of an organization) he is not free and ought not to be, since he is executing someone else's mandate. On the other hand, the scholar speaking through his writings to the true public which is the world, like the clergyman making public use of his reason, enjoys an unlimited freedom to employ his own reason and to speak in his own person. For to suggest that the guardians of the people in spiritual matters should always be immature minors is a nonsense which would mean perpetuating forever existing non-sense.

But should a society of clergymen, for instance an ecclesiastical assembly, be entitled to commit itself by oath to a certain unalterable doctrine in order to perpetuate an endless guardianship over each of its members and through them over the people? I answer that this is quite inconceivable. Such a contract which would be concluded in order to keep humanity forever from all further enlightenment is absolutely impossible, even should it be confirmed by the highest authority through parliaments and the most solemn peace treaties. An age cannot conclude a pact and take an oath upon it to commit the succeeding age to a situation in which it would be impossible for the latter to enlarge even its most important knowledge, to eliminate error and altogether to progress in enlightenment. Such a thing would be a crime against human nature, the original destiny of which consists in such progress. Succeeding generations are entirely justified in discarding such decisions as unauthorized and criminal. The touchstone of all this to be agreed upon as a law for people is to be found in the question whether a people could impose such a law upon itself. Now it might be possible to introduce a certain order for a definite short period as if in anticipation of a better order. This would be true if one permitted at the same time each citizen and especially the clergyman to make his criticisms in his quality as a scholar, i.e., through writings that make remarks about what is defective in the current arrangements. In the meantime, the provisional order might continue until the insight into the particular matter in hand has publicly progressed to the point where through a combination of voices (although not, perhaps, of all) a proposal may be brought to the crown. Thus those congregations would be protected which had agreed to (a changed religious institution) according to their own ideas and better understanding, without hindering those who desired to allow the old institutions to continue. But to unite on a persisting constitution that is not to be publicly doubted by anyone, even within the lifetime of a human being, and thereby to prevent the progress of humanity, this can only be disadvantageous to posterity, and is absolutely impermissible.

A man may postpone for himself, but only for a short time, enlightening himself regarding what he ought to know. But to resign from such enlightenment altogether either for his own person or even more for his descendants means to violate and to trample underfoot the sacred rights of mankind. Whatever a people may not decide for themselves, a monarch may even less decide for the people, for his legislative reputation rests upon his uniting the entire people's will in his own. If the monarch will only see to it that every true or imagined reform (of religion) fits in with the civil order, he had best let his subjects do what they consider necessary for the sake of their salvation; that is not his affair. His only concern is to prevent one subject from hindering another by force, to work according to each subject's best ability to determine and to promote his salvation. In fact, it detracts from his majesty if he interferes in such matters and subjects to governmental supervision the writings by which his subjects seek to clarify their ideas (concerning religion). This is true whether he does it from his own highest insight, for in this case he exposes himself to the reproach: *Caesar non est supra grammaticos*[2]; it is even more true when he debases his highest power to support the spiritual despotism of some tyrants in his state against the rest of his subjects.

The question may now be put: Do we live at present in an enlightened age? The answer is: No, but in an age of enlightenment. Much still prevents men from being placed in a position or even being placed into position to use their own minds securely and well in matters of religion. But we do have very definite indications that this field of endeavor is being opened up for men to work freely and reduce gradually the hindrances preventing a general enlightenment and an escape from self-caused immaturity. In this sense, this age is the age of enlightenment and the age of Frederick (the Great).

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[2] *Caesar non est supra grammaticos.* "Caesar is not above the grammarians." Grammarians are scholars who study the rules and principles of an art or a science.

A prince should not consider it beneath him to declare that he believes it to be his *duty* not to prescribe anything to his subjects in matters of religion but to leave to them complete freedom in such things. In other words, a prince who refuses the conceited title of being "tolerant," is himself enlightened. He deserves to be praised by his grateful contemporaries and descendants as the man who first freed humankind of minority, at least as far as the government is concerned and who permitted everyone to use his own reason in all matters of conscience. Under his rule, venerable clergymen could, regardless of their official duty, set forth their opinions and views even though they differ from the accepted creed here and there; they could do so in the quality of scholars, freely and publicly. The same holds even more true of every other person who is not thus restricted by official duty. This spirit of freedom is spreading even outside (the country of Frederick the Great) to places where it has to struggle with the external hindrances imposed by a government which misunderstands its own position. For an example is illuminating them which shows that such freedom (public discussion) need not cause the slightest worry regarding public security and the unity of the commonwealth. Men raise themselves by and by out of backwardness if one does not purposely invent artifices to keep them down.

I have emphasized the main point of enlightenment that is of man's release from his self incurred minority, primarily *in matters of religion*. I have done this because our rulers have no interest in playing the guardian of their subjects in matters of arts and sciences. Furthermore minority in matters of religion is not only most noxious but also most dishonorable. But the point of view of a head of state who favors freedom in the arts and sciences goes even farther; for he understands that there is no danger in legislation permitting his subjects to make *public* use of their own reason and to submit *publicly* their thoughts regarding a better framing of such laws together with a frank criticism of existing *legislation*. We have a shining example of this; no prince excels him whom we admire. Only he who is himself enlightened does not fear spectres when he at the same time has a well-disciplined army at his disposal as a guarantee of public peace. Only he can say what (the ruler of a) free state dare not say: *Argue as much as you want and about whatever you want but obey!* Thus we see here as elsewhere an unexpected turn in human affairs just as we observe that almost everything therein is paradoxical. A great degree of civil freedom seems to be advantageous for the freedom of the *spirit* of the people and yet it establishes impassable limits. A lesser degree of such civil freedom provides additional space in which the spirit of a people can develop to its full capacity. Therefore nature has cherished, within its hard shell, the germ of the inclination and need for free *thought*. This free thought gradually acts upon the mind of the people and they gradually become more capable of acting in freedom. Eventually, the *government* is also influenced by this free thought and thereby it treats man, who is now more than a machine, according to his dignity.

Koenigsberg, September 31, 1784

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Selection from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) is a key text of feminism. Its author, Mary Wollstonecraft, was not the first feminist, for this cause began with Christine de Pizan (see *The Book of the City of Ladies*) in the 1400s, when it was called the "Woman Question." Wollstonecraft, however, gave feminism its modern focus (see Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*) as she made women's rights part of the struggle for human rights in general.

Human rights was the defining issue of the Enlightenment, but no thinker before Wollstonecraft, including Voltaire (see *Candide*), Rousseau (see *Confessions*), and Jefferson (see *The Declaration of Independence*), even considered applying the concept of rights to women. In her treatise she forever changed the character of the debate on rights by arguing that men and women alike shared in the rights bestowed by nature. For her, the rights of liberty and equality applied to both men and women, and if fraternity made all men brothers, then men must accept that they had sisters as well.

Wollstonecraft stood in Rousseau's shadow, but she rejected his argument that the "duties" of women are "to please, to be useful to [men], to make [men] love and esteem them, to educate [men] when young, and take care of [men] when grown up, to advise, to console [men], and to render [men's] lives easy and agreeable." Although admitting that Rousseau accurately reflected existing society, she found his view morally wrong. She argued that women, as rational creatures, should be treated like men; that is, educated for virtue. Society's goal should be the full, free expression of both sexes.